CHURCHILL'S SHADOW



An Astonishing Life and a Dangerous Legacy

GEOFFREY WHEATCROFT

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To the memory of my father, Stephen Wheatcroft, Sub-Lieutenant Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, Fleet Air Arm pilot in HMS *Indomitable 1943–45;*

and of his brother, Albert Wheatcroft, Flight Sergeant, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, 455 Squadron Coastal Command, killed 24 May 1943;

and of my mother, Joy Reed Wheatcroft, personnel manager, Hoover munitions factory 1943–45;

and of her brothers, Geoffrey Reed, Lieutenant Royal Engineers, Prisoner of War in North Africa, April 1941, and Robert Reed, Lance-Sergeant, Royal Artillery 7 Commando, Prisoner of War in Crete, May 1941;

and of my wife's father, Frank Muir, Aircraftman First Class, Royal Air Force 1940–45;

and of his wife, Polly McIrvine Muir, Wren, Women's Royal Volunteer Service 1943–45;

and of her sister, Sister Isabella IBVM, ambulance driver in London, 1940;

and of her brother, Brian McIrvine, Lieutenant, Seaforth Highlanders, Prisoner of War at St Valery, May 1940;

and of all who served in Churchill's war.

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If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future.

Winston Churchill, May 1940

Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.

George Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, 1949

The victor will never be asked if he told the truth.

Adolf Hitler, September 1939

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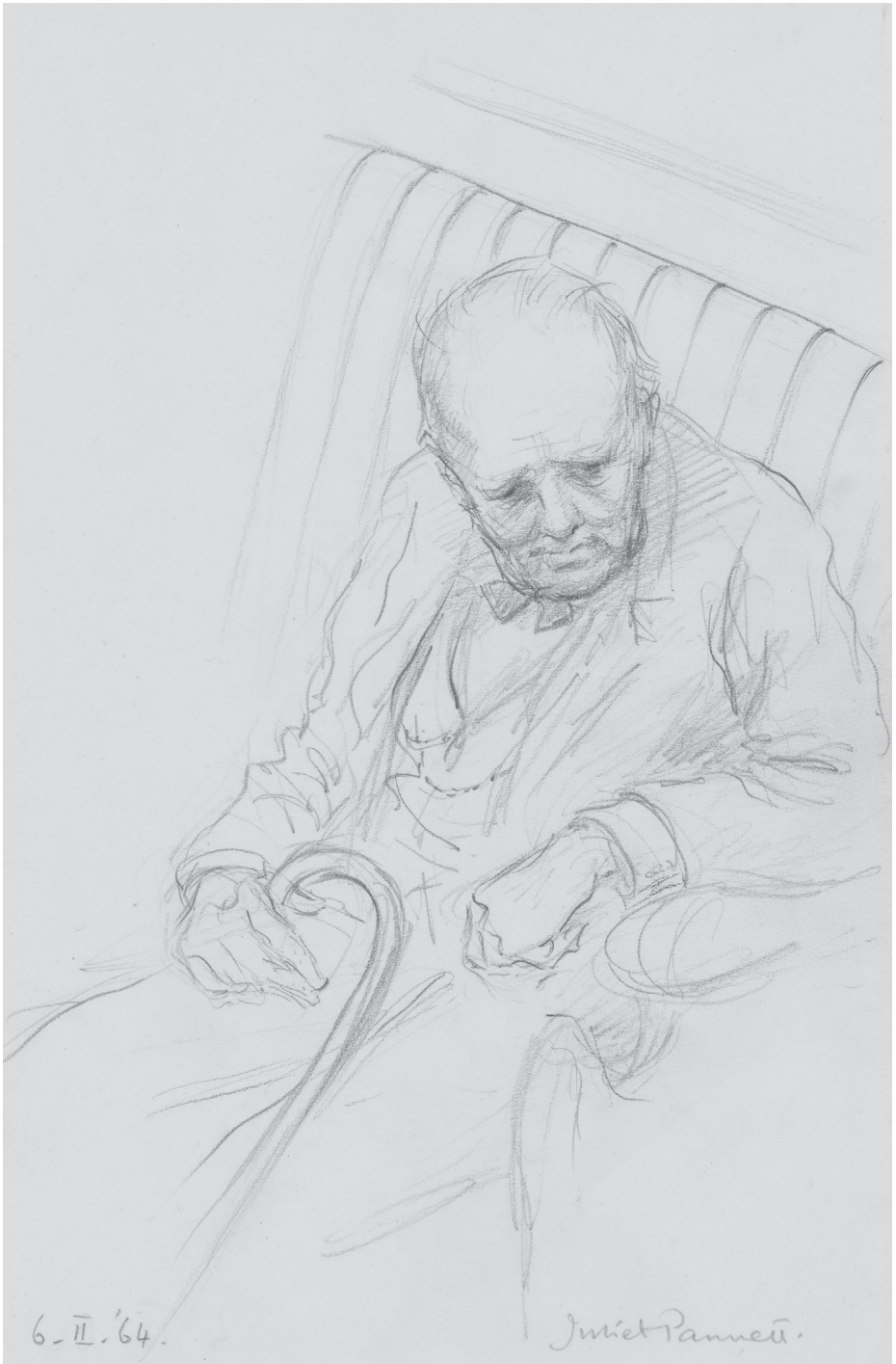
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Prologue: 'This little place'
House of Commons 1963

A hush fell as he entered the chamber in a wheelchair and took his seat, not on the Treasury Bench where he had sat as prime minister at an exalted moment in his country's history, but in another hallowed place below the gangway, from where he had once delivered his warnings about the threat from Adolf Hitler, and before that about the threat from Mohandas Gandhi. Sir Winston Churchill had sat in the House since the beginning of the century, but hadn't spoken for some years, was visibly frail, and may not have properly followed proceedings: by now more sacred talisman than elder statesman.

That day in the summer of 1963 was the one occasion when I ever saw Churchill plain and close at hand. I was a schoolboy absorbed by politics, and a friend's father, a Labour Member of Parliament, had given me a pass to the gallery of the House of Commons. For all that he was aged and infirm, I was glad to have seen him for myself, and to have seen him where I did. 'This little place,' Churchill had once said, 'is what makes the difference between us and Germany.' He was talking to another MP as they left the darkened chamber late one night in 1917, but he might have used the same words still more truly in 1940: 'This little room is the shrine of the world's liberties.' He left Parliament at last the year after I saw him, and died only months later, in January 1965 aged ninety, as if the last drop of political lifeblood had been drained from him when the initials 'MP' no longer stood after his name.

This book is an attempt to make sense of the man I saw that day long ago; to look hard at his reputation during his lifetime, and his influence since he died; to make a reckoning with his life and with his legacy, the long shadow he still casts; and to understand what he really meant to his contemporaries, and what he means to posterity. When I saw Churchill, no reminder was needed of how much he had

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loomed over our lives; what I couldn't have guessed then was how large he would still loom so long after his death – and yet how hard to grasp the reality of Churchill it would still be.

A few things should be said. 'Far too much has been and is being written about me,' Churchill sarcastically observed – and that was the best part of a hundred years ago, when he little guessed how much more, enormously more, would be written about him, not least by himself. Any writer might hesitate before adding to the huge corpus, or at least try humbly to explain himself if he does so. First of all, this book is not in any way a conventional biography. 'A shilling life will give you all the facts,' said Auden, and the official life of Churchill, begun by his errant son Randolph and completed by the late Sir Martin Gilbert, while costing a good deal more than a shilling, gives you many of the facts, though by no means all.

But then that's only part of the story. 'The posthumous life of Winston Churchill is one of the most remarkable phenomena of the post-Churchillian age and might serve as the subject for a book in itself,' the eminent American historian of modern England Peter Stansky wrote – as long ago as 1974, on the occasion of Churchill's centenary, less than ten years after his death! Nearly fifty years later, as we approach his sesquicentenary, Churchill's posthumous life has become a far more remarkable phenomenon. At one time I thought of writing a book to examine that afterlife, the scholarly and political debates over his reputation, his representation or misrepresentation in popular culture, 'Churchillism' in England, and the truly extraordinary growth of the Churchill cult in America. But I found it impossible to explain that without looking back at his life. Even then, to do so in a comparatively short compass might have a ring of Monty Python's 'summarise Proust' competition, but I emphasise that this is not a 'Life and Times'.

As far as possible I've tried to write as what Keynes called 'the historian of Opinion', seeing Churchill through the eyes of his contemporaries, and keeping in mind F.W. Maitland's rule: 'It is hard to think away out of our minds a history which has long lain in a remote past but which once lay in the future.' Events must be understood according not to how they turned out, but to how men at the time expected them to turn out: a principle which applies to Churchill's career more than most. And while I haven't tried to imitate the fashionable cinematic technique of non-linear narrative, since I'm not constrained by

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a month-by-month, year-by-year account, I've sometimes taken episodes out of sequence with flashbacks, and my lens has sometimes panned round a wider field, or zoomed in for close-ups of critical moments.

This has allowed me to dwell on certain passages or controversies in Churchill's career which have a particular resonance to this day: his imperial and racial attitudes; his belief in 'the English-speaking races' (later 'peoples') and their supposed unity, particularly in the form of an Anglo-American 'special relationship'; his strategical ambitions, obsessions and follies; his dealings with Ireland; his support for Zionism; his confused and conflicted attitude towards the bombing of cities and civilians; his complicated engagement with European integration and with what part, if any, the British should play in it; and, far from least, the legacy to this day of what he so dubiously called his 'wilderness years' and his critique of appeasement and the Munich agreement.

Part of the problem may be the sheer vastness of Churchill's life. He was born less than ten years after an American Civil War which would endlessly fascinate him, fought in a country he would visit for the first of many times at the age of twenty, and which would play a large part in his life, long before he was adopted there as a national hero and made an honorary citizen, in a ceremony which took place almost exactly on the centenary of Gettysburg. Or again, he was born four years after the Franco-Prussian war, whose sequel would dominate much of his life; he played a leading part in two more wars between Germany and France, but lived to see that 're-creation of the European family' based on a 'partnership between France and Germany' of which he had dreamed in 1946, if not quite the 'United States of Europe' he also advocated.

He rode in a cavalry charge in 1898; he lived to control atomic bombs. He celebrated his twenty-first birthday in 1895 while witnessing a patriotic rebellion in Cuba; he approached his eighty-eighth birthday as the world was nearly plunged into nuclear war over Cuba. He was elected to Parliament in the reign of Queen Victoria; he was prime minister to greet a new young queen fifty-one years later. He was appointed a Parliamentary Under-Secretary aged thirty-two in December 1905; he resigned as prime minister aged eighty in April 1955, the longest such ministerial span in British political history. The scope of his story is still hard to grasp.

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Then again, this is not a hostile account, or not by intention, nor consciously 'revisionist' or contrarian, except to the extent that any history worth reading must in some way revise what has gone before, and maybe also that I have a contrary nature. 'Alternative' might be a better word for my approach. 'The English-speaking peoples seem to have a settled view of Churchill's glory which no amount of historical debate will now alter,' his admiring biographer Andrew Roberts has confidently asserted. But do they, or should they? There was no 'settled view' of him during most of his lifetime, and controversy follows him to this day, as numerous episodes in recent years have shown.

Over the past thirty years, since the heavy hand of the official biographer was lifted from Churchill's archive, there has been a great flowering of serious Churchillian studies, which has opened many new perspectives on his life and conduct, some of them far from flattering. It's significant that the best of those books have been on specific aspects of his career: Churchill and domestic politics, Churchill and Empire, Churchill and America, Churchill and Ireland, Churchill and Zionism, Churchill as war leader, Churchill and the Bengal famine, Churchill and his war cabinet, Churchill and the writing of *The Second World War*, Churchill as rhetorician, Churchill as writer, Churchill and Lloyd George, Churchill and Attlee, Churchill and Roosevelt, Churchill and Orwell, Churchill and his son, Churchill and his money, Churchill and his horses, Churchill and his cook. Even others have to be seen in his shadow, so that a biography of the great union leader who became a central figure in Churchill's wartime government and then a famous Foreign Secretary is called *Ernest Bevin: Labour's Churchill*. And yet with all those books, and even now, so long after his death, the political historian Vernon Bogdanor has said plausibly that the definitive biography of Churchill is still to seek.

A photograph taken in the south of France in 1937 shows Churchill standing between the seated figures of two of the few writers of the age even richer and more successful than himself, Somerset Maugham and H.G. Wells. And it was Wells who once said that an ideal biographer would be 'a conscientious enemy'. He meant that a hero-worshipper would be blinded by devotion to his subject, in a way that might even provoke adverse reaction in an uncommitted reader. That's indeed true of Churchill's own fiercely partisan biographies of his father Lord Randolph Churchill and his forebear the first Duke of

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Marlborough, and even truer of Churchill's many biographers, or hagiographers. 'Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,' said Othello, and yet many hero-worshippers have extenuated lengthily and evasively, on everything from Churchill's racism to his drinking, to the extent that he may even have suffered more from worshippers than from detractors.

In November 1940, Churchill gave one his greatest and most moving speeches, if now too little remembered, his elegy for Neville Chamberlain, who had died of cancer only six months after he resigned as prime minister. It was a very difficult speech for Churchill, after his sustained criticism of Chamberlain's policy only two years earlier, but he handled this in masterly fashion, praising Chamberlain for his sincerity and his honourable hopes for peace, 'the most noble and benevolent instincts of the human heart'. After dictating the speech to his secretary, he said slyly, 'Of course, I could have done it the other way round.' But then that's true of almost any story, not least Churchill's own. 'Give me the facts, Ashley,' he once said to a research assistant with wilful naughtiness, 'and I will twist them the way I want to suit my argument.' I trust that I haven't twisted any facts, but I'm telling a story, and I could have 'done it the other way round'.

At the same time, with all his immense renown, Churchill remains in some ways a mystery. He was the most famous man of his century, but one of the most elusive. We seem to know everything about him, and nothing. We know his quips and quirks, we know about his cigars and his champagne, his dragon dressing gown, his silk underwear, his velvet siren suits and his innumerable hats, his paintings, his pigs and his budgerigars. But do we know his inner essence? Books have been written about the meaning of Hitler,* but what was the meaning of Churchill – or the reality?

'You know Winston has become a legend,' Churchill's wife said to his doctor in 1957, and many years later Umberto Eco was amused by a poll which found that more than a fifth of British children thought that 'Winston Churchill' was a fictional character. But Clementine spoke more truly than she knew, and those children weren't entirely wrong. A *legenda* was originally the life of a saint, and one later definition of 'legend' is 'an inauthentic story handed down by tradition

* *Anmerkungen zu Hitler* by Sebastian Haffner, 1978, translated as *The Meaning of Hitler*, 1979.

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and popularly regarded as historical'; not a bad description of the Churchill the world knows. He's part of our mental furniture, but in the same way that a fictional character is: part-Prince Hal and part-Falstaff, part-Sydney Carton and part-Mr Pickwick, part-Ben Ritchie-Hook and part-Ivor Claire. He has become a fabulous personage, like King Arthur or Robin Hood, who stands outside formal historical narrative and eludes it. When Sir Nicholas Soames was a little boy he went into his grandfather's bedroom and asked, 'Grandpa, is it true that you're the greatest man alive?' to be told, 'Yes it is. Now bugger off.' In a sense he has been saying that to all of us ever since, daring us to challenge the verdict.

'Such is the admiration for him, especially in the United States,' Wm. Roger Louis of the University of Texas and the late Robert Blake of Oxford, observed in 1993, 'that it sometimes seems difficult to separate the legendary figure from the man.' They might have added that by now the mythologising has gone beyond a point where such separation can be easily effected. The line at the end of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* – 'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend' – has been the guiding principle for depictions of Churchill in popular culture. If you go to a movie called *Lincoln,* it will be sentimental and reverential in the Spielberg manner, but will stick quite close to historical truth; if you go to a movie called *Churchill*, or *Darkest Hour*, it will be a travesty or fantasy unrelated to reality, and no one minds. And the myth-making – the transformation of flesh and blood into legendary 'Churchill' – was begun by himself. He was acclaimed as a new Caesar, a man who not only made history but wrote it; one might say rather that he remade history and rewrote it. His books are more than merely partisan, and sometimes frankly deceptive; they were all part of his wilful creation of a personal romance, or legend, and in the end more than that.

'What I've hoped to do,' said Joe Wright, the director of *Darkest Hour*, 'is reclaim the man from the icon,' in which case he conspicuously failed. 'Icon' or 'iconic' have become tiresome vogue words, along with 'totem' and 'totemic', but they really do apply to Churchill. He has long since been a totem, like the poles that the indigenous Haida and Tlingit peoples of the American north-west worshipped; and at the time of the invasion of Iraq, he was well-nigh borne aloft, like the icons or sacred images once held up before the Tsar's army as they marched to war, and too often to death and defeat.

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But then, icons or portraits of Churchill – photographs, paintings, sculptures, cartoons, posters, even figurines and Toby jugs – had made his appearance familiar from a very early age, and even now they're everywhere. A portrait photograph as a tiny boy shows him looking girlish, with long ringlets and a lace collar in the manner of the age. Then he was clad in a sailor suit, and went on to wear a dark coat and straw hat at Harrow as well as the uniform of the school Rifle Corps. At nineteen a formal portrait photograph has him wearing the magnificent full-dress uniform of the 4th Hussars (and wearing as well the 'sneer of cold command'), before he's seen on horseback in tropical khaki.

Entering the political fray, he could be addressing an election crowd from the top of a van in Manchester in 1908, or clad in astrakhan-lined greatcoat and tall silk hat beside the Guardsmen and armed policemen at the siege of Sidney Street in 1911. Even then he was still often in uniform; sometimes with a Privy Councillor's feathered hat, sometimes the tunic of the Royal Oxfordshire Hussars with whom he continued to train each summer while he was a Cabinet minister. By 1915 we see him in the trenches, wearing infantryman's khaki under a long shiny waterproof coat, and a French *poilu*'s helmet – always the distinguishing touch – which he alone of British officers on the Western Front had borrowed. To make the point, he was photographed in December 1915 wearing that helmet alongside General Fayolle, Commander of the French 33rd Corps.

In the next war, when he was the only prime minister, in a line which included the Duke of Wellington, ever to wear uniform while in office, he would sometimes be clad in the pale blue of an honorary Royal Air Force commodore, or the dark blue of the honorary colonel of the 4th Hussars, or the nautical rig he wore when meeting President Roosevelt at Placentia Bay in 1941, which was not, as one American popular historian had it, 'the mess jacket of the Royal Yacht Squadron', to which he never belonged, but the apparel of an Elder Brother of Trinity House.* Some images pleased him more than others. He delighted in one 1940 photograph of him at his cheekiest, fondling a

* This admirable long-established institution administers lighthouses and other navigational aids, and its Brethren are persons of eminence; Churchill once explained to a French visitor, 'Je suis un Frère Aîné de la Trinité,' and was congratulated on this high connection.

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tommy gun while he grins through his clenched cigar. In another image from that summer he appeared gazing resolutely ahead, a flight of aircraft above him, captioned with his words 'Let Us Go Forward Together', on a famous poster which would have a later career all of its own. But the 1941 portrait photograph by Karsh of Ottawa which now adorns the five pound note seems sententious, the jaw jutting a little too deliberately, the defiant glare a touch too blatant.

At a moment during the Great War when his fortunes had fallen very low, Churchill took up painting as a consoling recreation, but well before then others had painted him. He was painted in Dublin at the age of four and then around 1900, when he was still in his mid-twenties, Edwin Ward pictured him pensive at his desk, while the caricaturist 'Spy' caught him in a way that seems truer to life, legs asplay and hands on hips, with a faintly sarcastic smile on his lips. Sir John Lavery painted him in 1916 in that *poilu*'s helmet, but Lavery had also painted him just before this, as had Sir William Orpen, both catching him in melancholy mood at the moment his political career seemed finished. A portrait commission for the National Liberal Club was the first to be suppressed, or removed from display, when Churchill deserted Asquith. Ten years later he was painted by Walter Sickert, and ten years after that Sir William Nicholson painted an informal conversation piece of the Churchills taking tea at Chartwell. At the height of his fame, portraits were commissioned by the Carlton Club and by the House of Commons. The latter was the most famous, or notorious, of all – Graham Sutherland's portrait given to Churchill on his eightieth birthday, which Clementine hated so much that she later destroyed it.

Then there were the sculptures. His head was twice sculpted in 1942, by his cousin Clare Sheridan – a remarkable if ill-starred woman, who had briefly been infatuated with Bolshevism, and was certainly the only artist to portray Churchill as well as Lenin and Trotsky, as she had done while visiting Russia after the revolution – and by Sir William Dick Read, whose bust, now in the Imperial War Museum, has Churchill wearing his defiant scowl. Most famous is the 1946 bust by Jacob Epstein, different casts of which have stood on and off in the White House and have been the subject of endless controversy. Besides the large statue in Parliament Square, which was daubed by demonstrators in the summer of 2020, there are many others. At his old house of Chartwell, Churchill squats beside Clementine, above the caption 'Married Love'; a replica of this statue can be found in a

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shopping plaza in Kansas City. That's almost rivalled as kitsch by a double statue on the pavement at the bottom of Bond Street, where he and Roosevelt sit on a bench chaffing and laughing together. And he also now gazes over Jerusalem, and for no obvious reason over New Orleans beside the Riverfront Hilton.

If the world was conscious of Churchill's appearance, that was his doing, or at least his wish. From an early age, as he admitted himself, he wanted to be conspicuous in the front line, skirmishing on horseback on the Afghan frontier, or provoking his opponents in Parliament, but always recognisable. In an essay on political cartoons, he said that 'One of the most necessary features of public man's equipment is some distinctive mark which everyone learns to look for and recognise. Disraeli's forelock, Mr Gladstone's collars, Lord Randolph Churchill's moustache, Mr Baldwin's pipe – these "properties" are of the greatest value. I have never indulged in any of them, so to fill the need cartoonists have invented the legend of my hats.'

But he did 'indulge a prop', or more than one. A sarcastic observer said in 1940 that he was much the same as other politicians 'except that his hats are supposed to be funny', and they were certainly numerous and distinctive, from the *poilu*'s helmet to the nautical cap to the curious hat he took to wearing in London between the wars, a cross between a top hat and a bowler.* And another prop was his cigar. Having confirmed the habit of smoking Havanas while visiting Cuba, he was smoking ten a day as a young politician (which meant that he spent on cigars alone more than a labourer earned), and by his years of greatest fame he was never seen without one.

By then he was the cartoonists' delight, captured particularly well on many occasions by David Low of the *Evening Standard*, most famously just after the 1945 election, of 'Two Churchills': the grumpy, arms-folded 'Party Leader', despondent and sour after his rout at the polls, and then atop a plinth, 'The Leader of Humanity', looking much more cheerful and, of course, flourishing a cigar, as he tells the other, 'Cheer up! They will forget *you*, but they will remember *me* always.' Photographs, paintings and sculptures would be followed by movies and television, rather slowly at first but in the end a torrent. However good, or more often bad, they were, they were apt: Churchill loved

* Was it the '*Daily Mail* hat' which that newspaper tried not very successfully to promote?

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performance, on stage and then on screen, and saw public life as a great drama, with himself of course in the lead.

That drama has itself been revised and distorted, and has transcended serious historical discussion. How many people who saw *Darkest Hour*, how many viewers of television dramas about Churchill, how many members of Churchill Societies, how many of those who buy popular biographies, have read, or are even aware of a book published in 1932 called *The Tragedy of Winston Churchill*? American devotees will lap up a book called *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, but how many have read an excellent book published in 1970 called *Churchill: A Study in Failure*?

That book told the story of his career until 1939, and cast a sharp light on any idea of his inexorable 'destiny' to become a great leader. Had he been killed at Omdurman in 1898 he wouldn't even merit a footnote, and had he been killed on the Western Front in 1916 he would be known, like Haldane or McKenna, only to more serious students of early twentieth-century British political history. But if he had been killed by the van that knocked him down on Fifth Avenue in 1931, or even if he had died as late as the New Year of 1939, he would, as Paul Addison says, 'perhaps be remembered today as the most illustrious and interesting failure in twentieth-century British politics'. Certainly until his apotheosis he was more often seen as an 'interesting failure' than as the subject for a study in greatness.

One of his more entertaining books (although not his unaided work) was the collection of pen-portraits published in 1937 as *Great Contemporaries*. They include Bernard Shaw, and a question a critic once asked of Shaw might be applied to Churchill also: He was a great something, but a great what?

Was he a great politician? His own contemporaries rarely thought so, at least until his apotheosis. Was he a great democrat? His saying that democracy is the worst possible system apart from all the others has become one of the most hackneyed of all Churchillian saws, but we shall see that his attitude to democracy was complicated and compromised. Was he a great strategist? *The World Crisis*, his ostensible history of the Great War, is a lengthy defence of his own dubious record in that war, and almost an advertisement for his own strategic brilliance; it took another war in which he led his country to demonstrate how limited he was as a strategist, or even how little he properly understood modern war.

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Was he then a great writer? This Nobel laureate was acclaimed as one in his time, and he wrote fluently, prolifically and readably, with a real gift of self-expression, while making himself what Evelyn Waugh called 'a master of sham-Augustan prose'. But after around 1930 any assessment of him as a writer has to begin by establishing what proportion of the books or journalism, appearing under his name was actually written by him. And even at his best and most personal, he was incapable of writing history with any degree of detachment.

But surely he was a great prophet? This is at the heart of his self-created legend, the lone voice in the wilderness before the war, who told an American audience in 1946, 'I saw it all coming and cried aloud to my own fellow-countrymen and to the world, but no one paid any attention,' while claiming that the war 'could have been prevented in my belief without the firing of a single shot'. On close examination these claims are at best highly speculative.

For all that, Churchill was without doubt a great survivor, and a wonderfully successful story-teller. And that is at the heart of this book. 'I had a good tale to tell,' he said, looking back at his speeches and broadcasts in the first months of the war, and his whole life was spent telling stories, unsuccessfully until 1940, compellingly thereafter. After victory five years later he was *In Command of History,* the title of David Reynolds's outstanding book about the writing of *The Second World War*, and he has largely remained in command ever since.

That helps to explain why his afterlife has been as remarkable as his own long life. It was scarcely surprising that he was *Time*'s Man of the Year for 1940, or acclaimed five years later as 'The Leader of Humanity', or seemed by the time of his death the most famous person in the world, or was later dubbed 'Man of the Century'. Maybe it was inevitable that a poll in his own country in 2002 would consider him the Greatest Briton, and that he would later grace British banknotes. Less easy to foresee was the full degree to which, nearly six decades after his death, he would still dominate his country's consciousness, a country whose later history has been called a footnote to Churchill, or that he would be endlessly invoked by American politicians and publicists, while shrines and sectaries devoted to his memory would spring up, in England and all across America.

Whether this Churchillian obsession, or 'Churchillism', has been healthy or fruitful is another matter. Early in the last century the

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Italian prime minister Giovanni Giolitti spoke revealingly of 'beautiful national legends' which sustain a country (and which he didn't want undermined by allowing inquisitive scholars into the archives). How Churchill created a beautiful national legend of his own, and became one himself, is a central part of our story. 'His life stopped in 1940,' says Hester in Terence Rattigan's play *Flare Path*, about her sodden, faithless lover, a former fighter pilot. 'He loved 1940, you know. There were some like that.' Winston Churchill was like that. Although it would be too much to say that his life stopped that year, he said that '1940 was the best', and it was the best for him, his personal finest hour which would sustain him – and beguile his country – ever after. He led the British nobly and heroically during one of the great crises of history, and has misled them ever since, sustaining the country with beguiling illusions of greatness, of standing unique and alone, while preventing the British from coming to terms with their true place in the world.

'Men run with great avidity to give their evidence in favour of what flatters their passions and national prejudices,' David Hume told Edward Gibbon. 'Churchillism' has been a prolonged exercise in flattering passions and prejudice, those of his own country but those of his mother's country also: before his apotheosis in 1940, Churchill had become a widely published, and very highly paid, journalist and author, in America as well as England, although that didn't mean that he was universally popular with those Americans, high or low, who were aware of him. He had rediscovered America during his visit in 1929, and increasingly came to see the Americans as cousins, friends and instinctive allies of the British, a view which was partly inspired by his own literary and financial career. The belief was quite false at the time he conceived it, and would feed many illusions before, during and after the World War.

Even after the United States had belatedly and involuntarily entered that war, and then after the final victory, considerable suspicion of Churchill persisted among some Americans. Books severely critical of his conduct were published by American authors who included, most painfully, the president's own son Elliott Roosevelt; Churchill's monumental six volumes of *The Second World War* were, among other things, an answer to those critics. But quite soon American attitudes towards Churchill changed. Once he had been ejected by the British electorate at the moment of victory, observers

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noticed that he might be more popular across the Atlantic than in his own country.

After John Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961, 'Churchillolatry' grew immeasurably. He was the first president to invoke Churchill's name – perhaps significantly, he was also the first president in nearly thirty years who had never worked with him – and it was at his bidding that Churchill was made an honorary American citizen. Almost every president since Kennedy has followed his reverential allusion to the great name, which was ever more insistently cited by American politicians and publicists, at least as often as the names of Washington or Franklin Roosevelt. Ronald Reagan mentioned Churchill in his first inaugural speech, kept a 1940 poster of him in the Situation Room at the White House, and filled his administration with votaries of the cult. Even that was surpassed by the endless Churchillian invocations of George Bush the Younger.

By now Churchill was on his way to becoming not only an honorary citizen but well-nigh an honorary president, an ethereal presence on Mount Rushmore. He was mysteriously assimilated by Americans as one of their own and, as Sir Michael Howard said, seen by them as an ultimate hero and oracle, 'surpassing any comparable American figure in his goodness and greatness'. This reached a crescendo as the 11 September outrage was followed by a campaign in Afghanistan, a country where Churchill once fought, and with the invasion of Iraq, a country he largely invented. Along with his name, 'Munich' and 'appeasement', which he had turned into curses, were all too often shouted by American politicians and journalists in empty and ignorant fashion.

And so my title has a double meaning: the darker side of his character and career, too often brushed over, and the long shadow which he has cast since his death. And if I make much of Churchill's failures and follies, that's partly because others have made too little of them since his rise to heroic status. Harsh words about him will be found in these pages, but the harshest come from his contemporaries. And if I've stressed the dislike and distrust he inspired through much of his life, that's with a purpose.

At the heart of any discussion is Churchill's apotheosis in 1940. Lord Randolph Churchill's description of Disraeli's career, 'Failure, failure, failure, partial success, renewed failure, ultimate and complete triumph,' could to some extent be applied to Lord Randolph's son.

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Churchill's life until the age of sixty-five had certainly been a dramatic roller-coaster ride of highs and lows, or a game of Snakes and Ladders, with each ascent up a ladder followed by a precipitous fall, until that ultimate and complete triumph.

A more serious contention turns on that word 'destiny'. In a haunting passage, Churchill said that at the moment he was appointed prime minister 'I felt that I was walking with destiny, and all my life had been but preparation for that hour', hence the title of Andrew Roberts's biography, *Churchill: Walking With Destiny*, implying that because something happened it had to happen. By contrast, the title of Paul Addison's brilliant short biography *Churchill: the Unexpected Hero* rightly challenges any idea of inexorable 'destiny'. One may think that Churchill's accession to power in May 1940 was providential, as I do myself, but it was also astonishing, and in no way whatever pre-ordained.

My difficulty might be further explained by the responses of two celebrated English writers following Churchill's death in January 1965. Months later, A.J.P. Taylor published his very popular book *English History 1914–1945*, in which a biographical footnote on Churchill ended with the simple sentence, 'The saviour of his country.' But at the time of the funeral, Evelyn Waugh had told his friend Anne Fleming (widow of the writer Ian) that Churchill's death had left him unmoved: 'Always in the wrong, always surrounded by crooks, a most unsuccessful father.' My problem, that's to say, is that I think they were both right! Churchill *was* the saviour of his country. And he *was*, if not always, then far too often in the wrong. He was also a very poor judge of character who over the years surrounded himself with a crew whom indulgent biographers like to call buccaneers or adventurers, but for whom 'crooks' is scarcely too strong. As for 'unsuccessful father', that's all too tragically true, as the fates of three of Churchill's four children attest, all of them leading lives clouded by amorous and alcoholic turbulence or worse.

These difficulties were grasped by a great historian already mentioned. In 1940, Michael Howard was a schoolboy and three years later he was a subaltern in the Coldstream Guards, with whom he won the Military Cross at Salerno, before in the fullness of time he entered academic life, wrote an unsurpassed account of *The Franco-Prussian War* and several volumes on Churchill's war, became Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford and professor at Yale, was

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knighted and, well before his death in 2019 on the day after his ninety-seventy birthday, was honoured as one of the two dozen holders of the Order of Merit. A half century after the Finest Hour, this grand old soldier and scholar put it briskly: 'The problem for the historian, is not, as so many Americans believe, '– and have been encouraged to believe by doting biographers –' why Churchill's advice was ignored for so long, but how it was that a man with so unpromising a background and so disastrous a track record could emerge in 1940 as the saviour of his country.'

That is the problem this book addresses. As Howard went on: 'His arrogance, his egocentricity, his flamboyance, his emotionalism, his unpredictability, his remorseless energy, not least his eccentric taste in friends and generous indulgence in drink made him an outsider to the British "establishment" from the moment he entered politics at the beginning of the century until the day in May 1940 when they turned to him in despair because there was no one else to whom they could turn.' And yet that acute assessment has quite escaped public consciousness.

So has something else. Churchill brilliantly created a legend of himself as the man who 'saw it all coming' before 1939. He taught the terrible lesson of 'Munich', which could be invoked as warning, and guide. And yet on every occasion when action has been informed by the fear of appeasement or the ghost of Munich, woeful failure has followed, from Korea to Suez to Vietnam to Iraq and much more besides. Some American politicians like to say that they address any problem with the question, 'What would Jesus do?', although a detached reading of the Gospels doesn't suggest that they are a sure guide to everyday political action. 'What would Winston do?' is no better. If Churchill was such an oracle of wisdom, why has his shadow fallen over so many disasters?

This is also inescapably a personal book, because of who and what and when and where I was and am. I'm an early boomer, born two days before Christmas 1945. My conception the previous March when my father was on leave from the Royal Navy was an expression of hope, a mood of optimism strengthened, while my mother was bearing me, by the victories over Germany and Japan, as well as, for my parents and so many others of their age, by that other great victory, of Attlee and Labour over Churchill and the Tories in the general election.

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For those of us born after it, the war – and 'the war' for us always meant the one which ended in 1945 – was inescapable. So was Churchill, and not only because of his rather eerie return to Downing Street from 1951 to 1955. As my eminent contemporary Neil MacGregor has said, 'we all grew up not so much in the shadow of the Second World War, but in its presence … from early childhood we lived with the consequences.' In a still more extreme case, my late friend and sparring partner Christopher Hitchens recalled his own childhood, when the war was 'the entire subject of conversation'.

Some memories of war were audible. When I was about twelve I was watching something on television in which an air-raid siren was heard. At that moment my mother came into the room, and I saw her shudder involuntarily, as anyone might who had known London during the Blitz. Some memories were visible. Every other house seemed to have its wartime souvenir, from 'liberated' army revolvers to the hermetically-sealed tins of fifty Senior Service cigarettes, untouched years after they had been intended for warships in tropical ports or the Fourteenth Army in Burma, and whose lid was pierced with a satisfying hiss. Or there was the Fleet Air Arm flying jacket which my father had brought home, and which I later wore inappropriately, and lost, on a nuclear disarmament march.

Much of rural and urban England was still an audit of war. Ordnance Survey maps were speckled with the ghostly outlines of former aerodromes, Fighter Command airfields from Essex to Hampshire from which the Battle of Britain had been fought, or the stations from Yorkshire to Suffolk whence Bomber Command had waged the most distinctive, and controversial, British campaign of the war, as well as American relics in East Anglia, like the spectral Eighth US Army Air Force base which Dean Jagger revisits in *Twelve O'Clock High*. London was pockmarked by bomb sites, and many back gardens still had the quickly-built 'Anderson' bomb shelters, in which our elders had huddled during the raids and where we children now played. Even today, as far away as a tranquil stretch of the River Frome in Somerset where I swim in summer, there stands a 1940 pillbox, part of the last of three concentric defensive lines built against a German invasion which never came.

As schoolboys we catalogued Eighth Army and Africa Korps uniforms, we made model Spitfires – topside painted in camouflage, underside duck-egg blue – and we consumed a heavy diet of war

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books and war movies, good and bad, *The Wooden Horse*, *The Cruel Sea*, *The Dam Busters*, *The Cockleshell Heroes.* In the cheaper boys' comics, plucky Tommies hit Jerry for six, while in the *Eagle*, a more sophisticated comic for the better class of boy, we read the adventures in space of Dan Dare, and MacDonald Hastings the 'Special Investigator', but also 'The Happy Warrior', an interminable cartoon-series telling Churchill's life story up to the glorious year of 1945. Like every family home, it seemed, ours had Churchill's *The Second World War* standing imposingly on the bookshelves. Those six volumes also sat in countless American homes, the readership for which it was in some ways intended, even if far more people may have bought it than read it through. Read or unread, its influence was very great, and far from benign.

When I was seven, Everest was climbed and the Queen was crowned, with schoolchildren throughout the land given a day's holiday for the Coronation. That year of 1953 was for Churchill an *annus mirabilis* such as few men had ever known, winning the Nobel Prize in Literature and being dubbed Sir Winston as a Knight of the Garter. I was nine when Churchill finally retired, nineteen when he died. It's said that everyone of my generation remembers what he or she was doing on 22 November 1963 when the shattering news came from Dallas (quite true in my case: I was rehearsing *Volpone*, the school play).

By contrast with the assassination of President Kennedy, Churchill's death was anything but a sudden shock. His physical constitution was very tough, and his heart kept beating as he turned ninety, but if the flesh was almost willing the spirit was weak, and he had for some time ceased to take any pleasure in life. As 1965 began, the world waited for news from his deathbed, and the inevitable end was foretold with varying degrees of tact in newspapers and broadcast news everywhere: *'L'agonie de Churchill'* said a French newspaper headline I remember seeing in a Soho newsagent's shortly before he died on 24 January. And we who watched his funeral six days later – hundreds of millions of us in scores of countries – surely still remember it. What we couldn't begin to know that day was how loudly it would still resonate half a century and more later.

A note on nomenclature. The Churchill family adopted the idiosyncratic, and confusing, habit of rotating Christian names. To clarify as

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best one can, more than two centuries after the first Sir Winston Churchill was born in 1620, Lord Randolph Churchill was born in 1849, the younger son of the seventh Duke of Marlborough and died in 1895, having married Jennie Jerome and fathered Sir Winston Churchill, who was born in 1874 and died in 1965, having married Clementine Hozier and fathered Randolph Churchill, who was born in 1911 and died in 1968, having married Pamela Digby and fathered Winston Churchill, who was born in 1940 and died in 2010, having married Minnie d'Erlanger and fathered Randolph Churchill, who was born in 1965, married Catherine Lancaster, and fathered John Winston Spencer Churchill who was born in 2007. The subject of this book was one of the rare public figures recognisable from early years simply by their forenames, and over the years he has been referred to as 'Winston' by everyone from his political contemporaries to successors like Margaret Thatcher to some authors. I've avoided this familiarity and called him 'Churchill'. 'Lord Randolph' means his father and 'Randolph' his son. 'Little Winston' was what his grandparents called Randolph's son, who became another Winston S. Churchill MP, and I've used that name, not out of mockery but to avoid ambiguity.

'I do not consider that names that have been familiar for generations in England should be altered to suit the whims of foreigners living in those parts,' Churchill wrote defiantly on 23 April 1945. 'Constantinople should never be … Istanbul … If we do not make a stand we shall in a few weeks be asked to call Leghorn Livorno, and the BBC will be pronouncing Paris Paree. Foreign names were made for Englishmen, not Englishmen for Foreign names. I date this minute from St George's Day.' This might seem like a losing battle – few now say Constantinople, or would know where Leghorn is – but I sympathise with Churchill and have followed his advice. After all, we don't yet talk about Chamberlain and the München agreement, or the Allied armies taking Napoli in 1943. Quite apart from the very dubious cases of saying 'Mumbai' and 'Myanmar' to gratify bigoted Hindu nationalists on the one hand and on the other a brutal military junta, it would be absurd to use those forms rather than 'Bombay' to describe where Churchill alighted in 1896 and 'Burma' where a campaign was fought in 1944, and I have stuck to the forms he used. That includes the name of his own country. 'The conclusion of the Great War raised England to the highest position she has yet attained,' Churchill wrote a hundred years ago. He did not say 'Britain', still less 'the UK', he said what everyone

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then said, a usage I've also followed: either 'England' or 'Great Britain' but not the solecistic and ambiguous 'Britain'.

'Whosoever, in writing a modern history,' Sir Walter Raleigh said, 'shall follow truth too near the heels it may haply strike out his teeth,' a point he illustrated rather too vividly when he wrote his *History of the World* and was then beheaded. And Lord Clarendon was concerned that his history of the Civil War would 'make mad work among friends and foes'. I've tried my best to follow truth near the heels, and wait to see what happens to my teeth, or what mad work is made. But all in all, if my years in the company of Winston Spencer Churchill were sometimes exhausting, they were also exhilarating. I hope that I have in some measure repaid my absorption with this endlessly fascinating man.

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I

'Jolly little wars'

Malakand 1897

'After today we begin to burn villages. Every one. And all who resist will be killed without quarter.' Churchill was twenty-two when he took part in a punitive expedition on the frontier of Afghanistan, near where British as well as American soldiers would be fighting more than a hundred years later. One of our first images of him is as a boy on horseback, much later re-enacted by Simon Ward in *Young Winston*, but most memorably evoked by himself. He rode all along the skirmish lines 'where everyone else was lying down in cover,' he wrote to a friend. The Pashtuns 'need a lesson, and there is no doubt we are a very cruel people'. Riding like this might be foolish but he liked to play for high stakes, 'and given an audience there is no act too daring or too noble. Without the gallery, things are different.'

It was 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Ten years earlier a huge thanksgiving service in Westminster Abbey marking her Golden Jubilee was attended by rulers from across Europe and a gaudy assemblage of Indian princes, an affirmation of the majesty and might of the greatest empire the world had ever seen. There were celebrations throughout the land. In every village a free tea was given where squire and labourer, parson and innkeeper, all sat down together as equals for the first time, and maybe the last: this was the swansong of a rural England already on the point of economic collapse.

Then the fires were lit. 'From Clee to heaven the beacon burns': A.E. Houseman was topographically almost right, since it was on a peak of the Malvern Hills, not far from the Shropshire Lad's Clee Hill, that the first bonfire was lit, to signal the firing of lines of flame on every hilltop south towards Land's End and north to John O'Groats:

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Look left, look right, the hills are bright,
The dales are light between,
Because 'tis fifty years to-night
That God has saved the Queen.

Over those fifty years that God had saved her since she inherited the throne in 1837 as a girl of eighteen, the queen's sway had grown wider and farther. It was the Emperor Charles V, at least as Schiller imagined him, who spoke of his empire 'on which the sun never sets', and that phrase was much used by Victorians, if not with universal approval: when the radical Ernest Jones heard someone speak of 'our glorious empire on which the sun never sets', he interjected, 'and on which the blood never dries.'

One little boy was enthralled by it all. 'P.S. Remember the Jubilee,' said one of many letters to his mother from 'Your loving son Winny' that summer, begging to be allowed out of his school in Brighton and taken to see the great event, although he was also 'looking forward to seeing Buffalo Bill, yourself, Jack [his brother], Everest [his nanny, and the most important woman in his life apart from his mother, if indeed apart from her], and home'. The twelve-year-old's pertinacity was rewarded when he came up to London for the festivities, quite unaware of the crisis engulfing the political career of his father.

Born in 1849 the younger son of the seventh Duke of Marlborough and educated at Eton and Oxford, Lord Randolph Churchill was elected to Parliament in February 1874 as Member for Woodstock, still in effect a family pocket borough. Weeks later, at the British Embassy in Paris he married Jennie Jerome, whom he had met the year before at a ball given by the Royal Yacht Squadron in Cowes. American heiresses weren't yet the adornment of English aristocratic life they would soon become,* and the Marlboroughs required some suasion, as well as Leonard Jerome's offer to settle £50,000 on his daughter, before the duke relented. At Blenheim on 30 November, Lady Randolph, as she now was, gave birth to a boy, christened Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill.

* Lord Randolph's nephew, Winston's cousin, the ninth Duke of Marlborough, known as 'Sunny' from his Sunderland title and very much not from his disposition, married not one but two Americans, Consuelo Vanderbilt and Gladys Deacon.

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No sooner had his political career begun than Lord Randolph was embroiled in scandal. The Prince of Wales, Queen Victoria's affably indolent son, visited India in 1875 accompanied by a group of dissolute rich friends, among them Lord Aylesford. While they were away Aylesford learned that his wife had taken Lord Blanford, Lord Randolph's elder brother, as her lover, and he decided to divorce her. Throwing fuel on the fire, Lord Randolph let it be known that he possessed compromising letters from the Prince of Wales to Lady Aylesford. The prince was incandescent as Randolph and Jennie slipped across the Atlantic to avoid the wrath of Court and society. Or as their son much later coyly wrote, 'Engaging in his brother's quarrels with fierce and reckless partisanship, Lord Randolph incurred the deep displeasure of a great personage.' Winston himself would one day incur the deep displeasure of many personages, great and small, and his career was often marked by fierce and reckless partisanship.

To let tempers cool, Marlborough agreed to go to Dublin as Lord Lieutenant, with Lord Randolph as his unpaid private secretary. After the 1880 election, Gladstone became prime minister again and Lord Randolph was back at Westminster. He then embarked on a hectic campaign with the ill-disguised object of winning the Tory leadership, by what was then the outrageous means of appealing to the party outside Parliament. He was elected chairman of the National Union of Conservative Associations in 1883, he attacked the party leadership, and then, in an audacious gamble for high stakes, he resigned the chairmanship and was re-elected by acclamation. By May 1885 he had helped bring about the parliamentary defeat of Gladstone's government, and in Salisbury's short-lived first administration that followed he was made Secretary of State for India, aged thirty-six. Lord Randolph had already visited India, telling Parliament on his return that British supremacy was essential and would be doomed 'the moment we showed the faintest indications of relaxing our grasp', and in the mere seven months he held the office, he sent British forces on the road to Mandalay, while Upper Burma was annexed by the Crown. None of this was universally welcomed, and nor was Lord Randolph universally admired. His Cabinet colleague, the veteran Tory statesman Lord Derby, thought him 'thoroughly untrustworthy: scarcely a gentleman and probably more or less mad', words which would echo many years later.

For a generation to come, British politics would be dominated, and poisoned, by Irish conflicts, in which Lord Randolph and his son would

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play leading and often malign parts. Gladstone's private conversion to the principle of Irish self-rule became public, and was followed by an election which returned him to office, his introduction of a Home Rule Bill in Parliament in April 1886, and its defeat in the Commons in June when the Liberals split wide apart. Another election saw a Tory victory and Salisbury's return to the prime ministership. He made Lord Randolph his Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons, but not for long. Plunging recklessly into the Home Rule controversy, Lord Randolph visited Belfast. Whether or not he used the words often attributed to him, 'Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right', he certainly inflamed local passions. There was and would remain a case for the democratic rights of the Protestants of eastern Ulster, but the situation was potentially violent enough without Churchill's inflammatory grandstanding. Besides that, he angrily criticised the government's foreign policy in private letters, and in public speeches advocated reform, to the loud applause of a journalistic claque: by that autumn, the *St Stephen's Review* would describe him as 'the central figure in English politics'.

Then came another daring gamble for still higher stakes, and this time Lord Randolph lost. He wanted a reduction in military spending, which the war ministry opposed: a Cabinet dispute of a familiar kind usually resolved by compromise. On 20 December 1886, when Lord Randolph had gone to dine with the queen, he wrote to Salisbury from Windsor Castle – most improperly, and to the queen's great displeasure – threatening to resign. By now Lord Randolph had convinced himself that he was indispensable, and he thought that Salisbury would be obliged to make terms with him, but Salisbury called his bluff and accepted his resignation. He never held office again.

In his formal letter to the departing chancellor, the prime minister expressed his profound regret; speaking privately, Salisbury had complained that Lord Randolph had a 'wayward and headstrong disposition' and that he treated the Cabinet like 'an orchestra in which the first fiddle plays one tune and everybody else, including myself, wishes to play another'. When it was suggested that he might return, Salisbury said, 'Did you ever know of a man who, having got rid of a boil on his neck, wanted it back?' adding to another confidant, 'the qualities for which he is most conspicuous have not usually kept men for any length of time at the head of affairs.' As he grew up, Winston Churchill persuaded himself that his father's career afforded an

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inspiration; it should have offered a warning. Lord Randolph's contemporaries wondered whether he was a brilliant but thwarted statesman, or an impetuous adventurer and something of a mountebank, undone by his lack of judgement so that he threw away golden chances. These were the very apprehensions Winston's own contemporaries would so often feel about him: gifted but wayward and headstrong; energetic but overbearing and troublesome.

By 1890 Lord Randolph was a dying man, in the later stages of what was long thought to have been syphilis but may have been an obscure brain disease. Either way, his remaining years were horrible to contemplate: as Lord Rosebery chillingly wrote, 'He died by inches in public.' Excluded from power at home, he spent most of 1891 in South Africa trying to buy mining concessions while killing as many beautiful wild animals as he could, before he returned and tried to re-enter the political arena. But by the time he made his last Commons speech in June 1894 he was incoherent. He was taken on a last journey round the world, with Jennie and a doctor, but by the end of the year he was too ill to continue and was brought home as speedily as could be. He died on 24 January 1895, aged forty-five.

To understand a man, Napoleon said, you need to know how the world looked when he was twenty. Winston Churchill was twenty when his father died. Lord Randolph had lived to see his son grow up, and to be bitterly disappointed by him, a disappointment he never disguised. Both parents treated their son appallingly. They were both, in different but odious ways, wholly absorbed in themselves and their own lives, Lord Randolph with politics and finance, Jennie with luncheons and lovers. They rarely visited him at his schools or even wrote to him, leaving him to find what emotional support he could from his nanny, Mrs Everest; a neglect which had curious results.

He was a curious boy in any case. Churchill was clever but unacademic, with no gift for foreign tongues, either the Latin or Greek Classics which were then the staple of patrician education or modern languages, as he demonstrated in his later attempts at speaking French. But he could express himself – one schoolmaster was much impressed by a 1500-word essay on a coming war between England and Russia which he wrote at fourteen – and he had a very retentive memory. 'It was thought incongruous, that while I apparently stagnated in the lowest form,' he won a prize for reciting twelve hundred lines of Macaulay's 'Lays of Ancient Rome' 'without making a single mistake'.

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A lifetime later, Churchill's capacity to quote reams of verse would impress some, and irritate others, including Franklin Roosevelt.

His literary style was also formed in another unmistakable way. In adult life Churchill rarely went to church or pretended to be a believing Christian. He engagingly said that, having been obliged at school to go to chapel twice a day, he had acquired a 'balance of observance', like a bank balance, and that thereafter he only needed to top it up from time to time by attending christenings, weddings and funerals. But by sitting in chapel for many hundreds of hours during his school-days, he absorbed into his marrow two priceless English inheritances, which his speeches and writings would often echo, and which a later generation would barbarously discard: the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.

Having hoped that his son would become a barrister, Lord Randolph sourly settled on the military academy at Sandhurst rather than the intellectual rigours of Oxford. Even then, Churchill failed the Sandhurst entrance twice before passing with marks which ruled out the infantry and the crack 60th Rifles, the regiment of Lord Randolph's choice for him. Winston was commissioned into the 4th Hussars, the cavalry accepting lower grades from their officers, though requiring more private money. Lord Randolph ended his years of unremittingly harsh criticism of all his son's failings with a contemptuous blast: 'if you cannot prevent yourself from leading the idle useless unprofitable life you have had during your schooldays & later months you will become a mere social wastrel, one of the hundreds of the public school failures.' This was at the very time when Sigmund Freud was formulating his theories of childhood repression and reaction. And yet, so far from Oedipal rejection, which Lord Randolph's neglect and contempt might have merited, Churchill was obsessively devoted to his father, and ever after passionately concerned to justify himself to the shade of the man whose death had ended 'all my dreams of comradeship with him, of entering Parliament at his side, and in his support. There remained for me only to pursue his aims and vindicate his memory.' There is the crucial word: *vindicate*.

In 1897 the Queen's Diamond Jubilee was less opulent and triumphant than its Golden precursor. A procession took the queen through London to St Paul's where her carriage halted while a brief service was held on the steps of Sir Christopher Wren's great cathedral. The

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sight of the queen remaining seated in her open carriage shocked one German princess – 'after 60 years Reign, to thank God in the Street!!!' – but by now the queen, in her seventy-ninth year and increasingly infirm, would have had difficulty walking up the cathedral steps. Lord Salisbury was prime minister again as he had been for the Golden Jubilee, after the Liberal interlude of 1892–5, which saw the heroic return of Gladstone, prime minister again for the fourth and last time at the age of eighty-two, introducing a second Home Rule Bill which was passed by the Commons but thrown out by the Lords. After this defeat Gladstone resigned and was succeeded by Lord Rosebery for his brief prime ministership of 1894–5 – 'a strangely-lighted episode' as Churchill later called it – before the Tories were back in office for another ten years.

But the mood was perceptibly turning. While the end of the century saw a new boastful vein of imperialism, personified by Joseph Chamberlain and Cecil Rhodes, more acute observers could sense that something had changed. Houseman's brand of pessimism gave way to Rudyard Kipling's, with its mixture of imperial bravado and acute apprehension. Despite having become the Bard of Empire, Kipling disliked any idea of an official position, turning down the office of Poet Laureate, as well as a knighthood more than once (quite apart from privately calling King Edward VII, as the Prince of Wales became, 'a bloated corpulent voluptuary'). And his contribution to the Diamond Jubilee was a great minatory poem. 'Recessional' spoke of 'Dominion over palm and pine', but it warned:

> If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
> Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe,
> Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
> Or lesser breeds without the Law* –
> Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
> Lest we forget – lest we forget!

* Writing about Kipling more than forty years later, George Orwell said that these lines were 'always good for a snigger in pansy-left circles', conjuring up the image of a white master kicking some dark-skinned lesser breed, but that this couldn't be Kipling's meaning. The poem warns against conquerors' hubris, not a temptation for most Asian or African peoples at the time. The boastful Gentiles are plainly the Germans in their first flush of imperial arrogance; since Kipling seems to be making a distinction with 'or', the lesser breeds might be the Italians.

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Those profound words had no effect at all on Churchill. He relished dominion over palm and pine. He loved Sandhurst, he loved horses, he loved his regiment, he loved his country's greatness, he loved the Empire, he loved the colour and dash of battle even before he experienced it. Othello's 'Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!' was a phrase that might have been made for Churchill, not to say 'big wars that make ambition virtue'. To make ambition virtue for the time being, what he boastfully called 'jolly little wars against barbarous peoples' had to suffice, although the first war he witnessed, while comparatively little, was far from jolly.

In faraway Cuba José Martí led a patriotic rebellion against the Spanish rulers, a prelude to the Spanish–American War. By the autumn of 1895 Churchill had joined his regiment at its Hounslow depot, close to where Heathrow airport now stands. Eager for experience, he obtained leave to travel to the distant island, along with his first commission from a newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, at the age of twenty, and paid his first visit to his mother's country when he stopped briefly at New York. Looking back in 1930, he wrote that 'The minds of this generation, exhausted, brutalised, mutilated and bored by War, may not understand the delicious yet tremulous sensations with which a young British officer bred in the long peace approached for the first time an actual theatre of operations.' He was quite right that most people felt very differently after the carnage of the Great War, but Churchill's 'delicious' account gives no hint of the savagery of these 'operations' in Cuba under General Valeriano Weyler to put down the rebellion, which prefigured the horrors of the coming century. At least 200,000 Cubans died, Martí among them, while Weyler herded civilians into what he called *reconcentrados*. In a few years' time during the Boer War the British would borrow the name 'concentration camp' for the same purpose, before it was later borrowed again, in cruel mockery, by Adolf Hitler.

Having marked his twenty-first birthday in Cuba and confirmed his taste for Havana cigars, Churchill returned by way of New York, reaching the *Etruria*, his homebound liner, with only five minutes to spare, the *New York Herald* reported. He told the *Herald* that General Campos, his Spanish host in Cuba, was a most distinguished man who had shown 'rare judgement and great humanity', a dubious verdict. What Churchill didn't discuss, although he was very well aware of, was another war which impended during his brief stay in New York.

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At the end of 1895 a footling border dispute between Venezuela and British Guiana blew up into a crisis which very nearly led to armed conflict; at that very moment Churchill was in New York on his way home. With President Cleveland rattling his sabre, the *New York Times* sported the headline on 18 December, 'WANT TO FIGHT ENGLAND – Army and Navy Men Profess Great Eagerness to Go to War', while there was also loud talk of invading Canada. Even though it never took place and is now forgotten, this war that might have been casts a fascinating and ironical light on Churchill's later career.

By this time the phrase 'English-speaking races' was already current, with its strong overtones of Anglo-Saxon superiority. The scoundrelly Rhodes dreamed of bringing the United States back into the fold of the British Empire, while founding his scholarships at Oxford for 'Anglo-Saxons' in the form of 'white colonials', Americans and Germans. And Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, having built his fame with Sherlock Holmes, published in 1891 his mediaeval romance *The White Company*, which he dedicated 'To the hope of the future, the reunion of the English-speaking races.' A grave misunderstanding was in the making.

One of Churchill's biographical essays is on Joseph Chamberlain, the brilliant and sulphurous politician who had transformed Birmingham before entering Parliament 'to establish', in Churchill's words, 'quite new levels for the political and social status for the mass of the people'. Having broken with Gladstone over Home Rule in 1886, Chamberlain moved from Radicalism to Imperialism and served as Colonial Secretary under Lord Salisbury in the 1890s. He was closely implicated in the Jameson Raid, which Rhodes had helped instigate at the end of 1895 and which adumbrated the Boer war. Before that, Chamberlain had been sent to Washington by Salisbury to settle a dispute over Canadian fisheries. Both of his first wives had died young after giving birth to sons, and in America he met his third wife, Mary Endicott, daughter of President Grover Cleveland's Secretary of the Army. Thus it was that, apart from two twentieth-century British prime ministers who had American mothers,* thanks to the third Mrs Chamberlain, a foreign secretary and another prime minister – the half-brothers Austen and Neville Chamberlain – had an American stepmother.

* Churchill and Macmillan.

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And it was Joe Chamberlain who said: 'I refuse to think or speak of the United States as a foreign nation.' Much later this would be turned by Churchill into a doctrine, the Anglo-American 'special relationship'. Alas, Chamberlain's sentiment, like Churchill's doctrine, was rarely reciprocated by Americans, then or since, and was based on a complete misprision, as well as a rewriting of history. What was 'special' about the relations between the two countries from the eighteenth to the twentieth century was mutual hostility and suspicion. Not only had the United States been born through armed rebellion against England, the two countries were at war again in 1812, when the redcoats burned the Capitol, and a British 'rocket's red glare' over besieged Baltimore inspired what would become the American national anthem.* During that century the two countries nearly went to war again at least three more times. As prime minister in the 1840s, Sir Robert Peel was acutely conscious of the American threat to Canada, and warned Parliament of possible war. This was the age of 'manifest destiny', which for many Americans meant their country's destiny to rule the whole of North America, including Canada. At the 1844 presidential election James Polk and the Democrats campaigned on a bellicose platform, demanding the territory which would become the Canadian province of British Columbia, the Pacific coast from Oregon north to the 54th parallel and the border with Russian America, now Alaska: hence the unwieldy slogan 'Fifty-four forty or fight!' When Polk was elected, he backed off and found an easier target to the south, embarking on the Mexican–American War of 1846.

Little more than fifteen years later the United States was again at war, the one war in their history in which American forces endured really heavy casualties and in which the country knew terrible suffering: the war they fought against each other. Not only did the Civil War divide England as well as America, a war between the two countries seemed close on more than one occasion. With the Confederacy demanding that London recognise its sovereignty and threatening to cut off cotton supplies, some English politicians, including Gladstone, soon to be prime minister, favoured recognition. Two Confederate commissioners were despatched to England in November 1861 aboard the *Trent*, a British mail packet, but were seized near Cuba by the USS

* Whose last words, '… and the land of the free', needed qualification. Maryland was a slave state at the time: the land was more free for some than others.

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San Jacinto. 'Have these Yankees then gone completely crazy?' Friedrich Engels asked his friend Karl Marx. Taking 'political prisoners' in this way, Engels thought, was 'the clearest *casus belli* there can be. The fellows must be sheer fools to land themselves in war with England.' Some hotter heads in Washington wouldn't have minded that, and Lincoln had to tell his Secretary of State, 'One war at a time, I think, Mr Seward.' Even after the Civil War, animosity remained acute, thanks partly to the quarrel over the *Alabama,* a commerce raider built in England for the Confederacy.

Many years later Churchill would 'remember vividly' his return voyage from New York, 'looking at ships off the English coast and wondering which one would be our transport to Canada'. In the event the 4th Hussars weren't sent westwards to fight the United States Cavalry. The crisis was defused by Salisbury's wise restraint but, as Churchill said, 'the exuberant pride of Americans could not long be held in check,' and the Spanish–American war duly followed, to begin America's great age of empire. What he omitted to say was what others saw at the time: that whereas the English were dismayed at the prospect of war with the United States, in America, as Sir Robert Ensor wrote, 'a war with England was the most popular of all wars'.

Having returned to England, Churchill sailed with his regiment for India, and for the golden days and nights of Bangalore. *My Early Life*, his memoir published in 1930, conjures up the enchanted life of a young English officer in an Indian cantonment in the last years of Victoria's reign, a world so distant from the twenty-first century that it might be Classical Antiquity. Churchill shared a bungalow with two other officers, Reggie Barnes, who had been his companion in Cuba, and Hugo Baring. His salary of fourteen shillings a day, or around £250 annually, with £3 a month to keep two horses, was supplemented by an annual allowance from his mother of £500 a year (about ten times an English miner's income). With this he was able to retain three personal Indian servants, a butler, a dressing boy or valet, and a groom.

His day began as he was woken before dawn by 'a clammy hand adroitly lifting one's chin and applying a gleaming razor to a lathered and defenceless throat'. Then came parade at six, drill and manoeuvres, hot baths followed by breakfast, stables and orderly room until ten-thirty, and the bungalow again: 'long before eleven o'clock all white men were in shelter'. After a brief lunch at one-thirty they slept – or

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in Churchill's case read – until five, when they could devote themselves to 'the serious purpose of life . . . in one word – Polo'. Usually Churchill played at least eight chukkas, 'and often more than ten or twelve', before they went sweating and exhausted to more hot baths, the mess, and 'the clinking of ice in well-filled glasses', dinner with the regimental band playing, 'smoking in the moonlight till half-past ten or eleven', and bed. That was his day, 'and not such a bad day either'. The glow of this happy memory stayed with him ever after, with less happy consequences.

A cavalry officer's unexacting life afforded Churchill the opportunity to catch up on the education he had missed at Harrow. He read Gibbon and Macaulay, and from them acquired a love of history, as well as that sham-Augustan style, he read Adam Smith and Darwin's *Origin of Species*, he read the *Annual Register*, a catalogue of political events, and he read *The Martyrdom of Man* by Winwood Reade. Now forgotten, this book was hugely influential in its day, a popularised cocktail of godless pessimism, Nietzsche, 'Dover Beach' and Kipling's 'If . . .'. Although Churchill was never an 'intellectual', a word he would later use contemptuously, still less a scholar, his natural intelligence was formed by this ragbag of reading. And his belated education inspired a love of the story-telling which would play a central part in his life.

Later generations can still sympathise with some of what he absorbed, at least the Victorian belief in human betterment, but some now seem far darker. Churchill learned about the grandeur of the Roman Empire from Gibbon: 'If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus.' For Churchill, that Golden Age of the Antonines in the first century was equalled for happiness and prosperity by the golden age of Victoria, and the British Empire, whose progressive and enlightened character Macaulay extolled, rivalled the Roman Empire as a force for good. And yet Churchill's much later phrase about 'the august, unchallenged and tranquil glories of the Victorian Era' was distinctly rosy: there wasn't a single year of the Queen-Empress's very long and 'tranquil' reign when British soldiers weren't fighting and killing somewhere on earth.

More than that, Churchill learned from Reade that man was alone in the world and master of his fate, that life was constant conflict,

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and that, as Darwin had taught, the fittest survived. 'Social Darwinism' later became an opprobrious term, and any belief in racial superiority would be irredeemably tainted. But Charles Darwin was himself a social Darwinian. He envisaged that quite soon 'the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world', so that there would be a wider break 'between man and his nearest allies', a distance between 'the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla.'

This was often elided into imperialism and 'Anglo-Saxonism'. A generation older than Churchill, Sir Charles Dilke was a rising Liberal politician who might have become prime minister but for a melodramatic divorce case. His 1868 book *Greater Britain* was very widely read for years to come with its gospel of 'England round the world', drawing from his lengthy travel conclusions, as a biographer has said, 'at once radical and racialist'. He believed that 'America offers the English race the moral directorship of the globe,' while writing with something near pride about the fate of the American Indians that 'the Anglo-Saxon is the only extirpating race on earth'. The young Churchill absorbed this idea of racial struggle. He sometimes spoke of the need to extirpate the Chinese, and he never lost a Darwinian contempt for non-European races.

Ten years after 'Winny' had begged to see the Golden Jubilee, the Diamond Jubilee of 1897 found him back in England once more, on leave but ready for a fight, verbal or physical. He had already begun to combine one career in the army with another in journalism, and yet another beckoned in politics. On 26 June 1897, just four days after Queen Victoria visited St Paul's, Churchill made his first political speech. This honour goes to Claverton Manor, a country house just outside Bath, now by fortuitous but felicitous coincidence the American Museum, where a fete was held by the Primrose League, that remarkable Conservative organisation of its age. Fifty years later Churchill would boast that his father's membership card was Number 1, and the Primrose League was indeed founded by Lord Randolph, not to say largely to promote his interests, although ostensibly in memory of that other half-mountebank, Disraeli. With much flummery – badges worn by 'knights' and 'dames' meeting in 'habitations' – its membership grew from 11,000 in 1885 to more than a million when

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Churchill spoke at Claverton Manor to an astonishing two million in 1910, when the electorate was still no more than 7.7 million.

His speech was given at the height of the Season, when that still meant something, and when, as Churchill liked to say later with undisguised regret, Society meant even more: a tight-knit interrelated patriciate which had owned and ruled the country since the Glorious Revolution, which still dominated Parliament, and which shared the same amusements. Apart from the round of dinners and dances, he attended race meetings which were also social occasions, although it would be another half century before his son-in-law Christopher Soames kindled in Churchill a real enthusiasm for the Turf. And it was 'on the lawns of Goodwood in lovely weather' that he heard riveting news. He had thought of persuading a newspaper to let him cover conflicts brewing in the Balkans, but this was something much better.

As British rule in India expanded it had come to a halt in the north-west where it ran up against the mountainous kingdom of Afghanistan. On the far side lay Russia, expanding just as relentlessly, and Afghanistan was caught in the Great Game for mastery of central Asia. Neither power ever subdued the country, and the British had learned the hard way in 1839–42 and 1878–80 just what a thankless and fruitless task invading Afghanistan was, a lesson which they had quite forgotten by the twenty-first century. The first of those two Afghan Wars saw one of the worst disasters in imperial history, an entire expeditionary force to Kabul wiped out save the one survivor memorably portrayed in Lady Butler's painting 'Remnants of an Army'.

Nor did the next war subdue 'the wily Pathan', as the English then knew those who would later be called Pashtuns. One officer who had served in what was candidly described as the punitive expedition of 1880 was General Sir Bindon Blood (a name only the rashest author of imperial yarns would confer on a character), who was now given charge of another such expedition. Churchill already knew General Blood, and frantically secured an attachment to his force, along with a commission from the *Daily Telegraph* to write about it, before reaching India post haste to join the force on the North-West Frontier. 'War' might not be quite the word for an expedition whose purpose wasn't to conquer and occupy territory but to punish the tribesmen by burning their villages, destroying their crops, filling in their wells, and otherwise depriving them of food and water.

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'Financially it is ruinous, morally it is wicked,' Churchill told his mother, 'but we can't pull up now.' The Pashtuns 'recognise superiority of race'. And anyway, 'it was all very exciting and for those who did not get killed or hurt, very jolly.' He wasn't one of those who got killed but, not for the last time in his life, Churchill might have been. He was brave, and foolish, and lucky. It could so easily have been the end of a young Englishman imagined in another of Kipling's verses – well known to British officers in India, as Churchill sardonically noted – the bitter little 'Arithmetic on the Frontier'.

> A scrimmage in a Border Station –
> A canter down some dark defile –
> Two thousand pounds of education
> Drops to a ten-rupee jezail* –
> The Crammer's boast, the Squadron's pride,
> Shot like a rabbit in a ride!

Having played to the gallery on his grey pony, he then looked for another audience by turning his reports into his first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force.* In the following year, enjoying a remarkable degree of tolerance from the military authorities as well as the string-pulling influence of his mother, although not the warm approval of all his brother officers, Churchill joined one more campaign, this time led by General Kitchener. Its purported aim was to suppress a rising in Sudan by an army of 'dervishes', the Islamic radicals of their day, led by the self-proclaimed Mahdi, a warrior preaching holy jihad in the name of the Prophet, although along with a crusade against jihad, and belated vengeance for the death of General Gordon in 1885, Salisbury was concerned to pre-empt French moves towards the upper Nile.

'I have a keen aboriginal desire to kill several of these odious dervishes,' Churchill wrote to his mother from Sudan, and so he did. On 2 September 1898, at the battle of Omdurman beside the Nile just north of Khartoum, Churchill charged with the 21st Lancers, and personally killed a number of 'odious dervishes' with his pistol, in what was less battle than slaughter, conducted on the very principle

* The approximate cost of educating a boy at a fashionable English boarding school for five years; something in excess of two hundred thousand pounds of education would be more like it today. A jezail was a cheap rifle.

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Hilaire Belloc described in his verse satire *The Modern Traveller*, published that same year: 'Whatever happens we have got / The Maxim gun and they have not.' Kitchener had in fact no fewer than fifty-two Maxim machine guns ranged against dervishes armed with spears. Here was a different kind of arithmetic on the frontier: all of forty-seven British soldiers fell, while more than 10,000 Sudanese were killed in the hail of bullets. 'Talk of fun! Where will you beat this?' Churchill said, while also tersely recording that 'all Dervishes who did not immediately surrender were shot or bayoneted', including the wounded.

This campaign quickly produced another book, *The River War*, whose few sharp criticisms of Kitchener caused controversy. Churchill was still more trenchant on the faith for which those dervishes died. 'How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries!' he wrote. 'Besides the fanatical frenzy' and 'this fearful fatalistic apathy,'

> improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture... 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... No stronger retrograde force exists in the world.

This was one more opinion which Churchill never changed.

Even before sailing east for the first time Churchill had told his mother that he looked upon going to 'the tedious land of India – where I shall be equally out of the pleasures of peace and the chances of war ... as a useless and unprofitable exile'. He hoped to find action in South Africa, where a few months would win him a couple of medals, and 'Thence hot foot to Egypt – to return with two more decorations in a year or two – and beat my sword into an iron despatch box,' meaning a political career. This wonderfully flagrant catalogue of ambition was fulfilled, although not in that order, and Churchill returned to India for one last time, and one last purpose.

'I can hardly describe the sustained intensity of purpose with which we threw ourselves into this audacious and colossal undertaking.' It might

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be Churchill in his later years, and at his ripest and most majestic, perhaps on the Normandy landings of 1944. He is in fact describing the Inter-Regimental Polo Tournament of 1899, held at Meerut, a 1400-mile railway journey from Bangalore. When he had first arrived in India Churchill had dislocated his left shoulder by falling as he disembarked at Bombay, and now the shoulder went again. In one more display of his courage and sheer tenacity, he played with that arm strapped to his side. He was still able to help the 4th Hussars beat the Royal Dragoons in the final, a glorious victory, followed by 'Prolonged rejoicings, intense inward satisfaction, and nocturnal festivities from which the use of wine was not excluded.'

After telling his mother that he wanted to win renown as a soldier before politics, he had made detailed plans for the year 1899: 'To return to India and win the Polo Tournament: to relieve my mother from paying my allowance: to write my new book … and to look out for a chance of entering Parliament.' He even conceived a fancy for belatedly going to Oxford, until he realised that some knowledge of Classical languages would be required. Since 'I could not contemplate toiling at Greek irregular verbs after having commanded British regular troops', he abandoned the idea. But he resigned his commission, returned to England, and stood that summer as a Tory parliamentary candidate in a by-election at Oldham. He and his running-mate in the two-member constituency were both beaten, at which 'Everyone threw the blame on me. I have noticed that they nearly always do.'

Three wars had begun to launch Churchill's career; a fourth would make him famous. In the autumn of 1899 the war in South Africa, which he had only half-humorously predicted, would be the next step in his quest for fame and fortune as journalist, publicist and politician. The British had acquired a toehold at the Cape of Good Hope during the Napoleonic Wars, but until the second half of the nineteenth century it remained one of the most neglected of imperial outposts, and 'South Africa' was a geographical description rather than a country, a patchwork of surviving African kingdoms, two British colonies and two Boer republics, the South African Republic or Transvaal and the Orange Free State, ruled by a few score thousand farmers ('boer' is 'farmer' in Dutch) descended from Dutch and French settlers.

But South Africa had been utterly transformed by the discovery of diamonds at Kimberley in 1867 and then gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886, and it was gold that lay behind this strange, bitter conflict, a 'war of choice' if ever there was, as even Lord Salisbury acknowledged

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in private. In 1899 he was head of the greatest empire ever known, both Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, but curiously detached from a war he didn't want. He told the queen in May that war would be unpopular with the British people and was 'very much to be deprecated'. At the end of August he told Lord Lansdowne that they had been forced to act on a ground prepared by Sir Alfred Milner, the scheming, clever, deplorable High Commissioner in South Africa, 'and his jingo supporters. And therefore I see before us the necessity for considerable military effort – and for people whom we despise and for territory which will bring no profit and no power to England.' This was quite close to what radical opponents of the war said: that it was fought to make the Rand safe for the Randlords, the immensely rich mine-owners, all at enormous cost to England, and deepest shame.

Within three days of the outbreak of war on 11 October, Churchill was sailing south aboard the *Dunottar Castle*. He was commissioned by the *Morning Post*, one day to become his most envenomed foe, on a lucrative contract of £250 a month and expenses, and he was fortified by a personal consignment of five dozen bottles of assorted drink from champagne to whisky. By the time he reached Cape Town, the war was going badly for the British, and would go worse before the year ended. Indeed the Boers might have won with wiser strategy. Once the Orange Free State threw in its hand with the Transvaal, the Boers had 50,000 horsemen in the field: not cavalrymen like Churchill's hussars but mounted infantry of outstanding quality, countrymen who had learned to ride a horse and fire a rifle from boyhood. To begin with they were more than a match for the plodding British, but the Boer commanders dissipated their forces by fruitlessly laying siege to Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking. Had they masked and by-passed those towns and driven south as fast as possible, they might well have taken Cape Town before British reinforcements could arrive, and the future of South Africa would have been very different.

Soon after Churchill arrived at Durban he set off in an armoured train through Natal, but it was ambushed and he was taken prisoner. He was lucky to survive, and not just the skirmish when the Boers surrounded the train. On the North-West Frontier and at Omdurman, Churchill had played an unusual (and unpopular) role as a soldier who was also a reporter, but at least he was an officer holding the queen's commission. When the Boers captured him his position was much more ambiguous, and made no less so by his change of tune. He was

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legally a civilian, but he admitted that 'I had taken with me, Correspondent status notwithstanding, my Mauser pistol', though later he claimed to have lost his pistol before he was captured.

On 26 November he demanded to be released as a non-combatant, saying that 'I have consistently adhered to my character as a press representative, taking no part in the defence of the armoured train,' but then on 30 November, after he heard that there might be an exchange of prisoners, he asked to be classified as a 'military officer'. Through all this obfuscation it's clear that he was armed but in plain clothes when the attack began, in which case his captors would have been entitled, as he well knew, to treat him as a *franc tireur*: under the recognised custom of war, anyone captured in civilian dress but bearing arms could be shot out of hand, as had happened to numerous Frenchmen (and women) during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870–71, and would happen to plenty of German men (and boys) in north-western Europe in 1944–5.

But the Boers recognised his importance and were determined to keep him in captivity, even when he said on 8 December, 'If I am released I will give any *parole* that may be required not to serve against the Republican forces or to give any information affecting the military situation.' He was taken to Pretoria, the Transvaal capital, and held in prison, before he made a dramatic escape. This became part of the Churchill legend, and his own account of how he hid in a mineshaft before he crossed into Portuguese territory secreted among bales of wool in a railway truck is wonderfully vivid. And yet the ambiguities persisted. Did he leave behind two comrades with whom he had promised to make the escape, and did he in fact break the parole or promise he had given the Boers? At any rate, the story long pursued him: as late as 1912, when he was First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill was still suing for libel over the 'broken parole' charge. From boyhood onwards no one had doubted Winston Churchill's energy and ambition; now for the first time, his honesty and honour were questioned.

For the moment, he returned to Durban a hero, before joining a column commanded by his friend Ian Hamilton, who would one day play a much unhappier part in Churchill's career. While turning out a stream of newspaper reports which became another two books, both appearing in 1900, *London to Ladysmith Via Pretoria*, and *Ian Hamilton's March*, he found the energy in the same year to write his only novel. *Savrola* is a swashbuckling if not quite bodice-ripping

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adventure novel, and his only attempt at fiction; he later endearingly, and understandably, said that, 'I have consistently urged my friends to abstain from reading it.' It still made a tally of five published books to his name by the age of twenty-six.

In the autumn of 1900 Salisbury sought to take advantage of apparent victory by calling what became known as the 'khaki* election' to exploit patriotic enthusiasm, a trick Lloyd George successfully repeated in 1918 but Churchill conspicuously failed to repeat in 1945. Churchill returned home and stood again for Parliament at Oldham, and this time he managed to win the seat. When the election took place, over several weeks, as was then customary, from 28 September to 24 October, few guessed that the war would last for another year and a half; a bitter guerrilla campaign needlessly prolonged by the British, who used means – the burning of farms and the internment of Boer civilians in self-proclaimed concentration camps, where many women and children died – which earned lasting obloquy. As it was, the election was another triumph for the Tories, and for Salisbury. It was his last hurrah: his powers already fading, he handed over the Foreign Office to Lord Lansdowne, and then, in July 1902, the premiership to his nephew A.J. Balfour, before dying a year later.

Although the new Parliament met for a brief autumn session, the new Member for Oldham was absent. Oldham was one of the first constituencies to declare, and Churchill set off forthwith to give a lantern-slide lecture about South Africa, at the St James's Hall in London, and then throughout the provinces, earning himself £3782 in all. His lecture was called 'The War As I Saw It'. That was not only just right, or all too true, it was a title which would have served accurately enough for his two later histories of the much greater wars which began in 1914 and 1939. He then left England until the new year for a lucrative north American lecture tour. At the Waldorf-Astoria in New York he was introduced by Mark Twain, with undisguised irony: 'Mr Churchill by his father is an Englishman, by his mother he is an American, no doubt a blend that makes him the perfect man.' A myth later arose that Twain had called Churchill the 'hero of five

* From the Urdu word for 'dust-coloured', khaki is the drab brown which the British Army, finally abandoning its red coats on active service in all climes, had now adopted for wartime uniform.

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wars, author of six books and future prime minister of England', a vainglorious phrase which was actually coined by Major James B. Pond, Churchill's tour manager. What Twain said was very different.

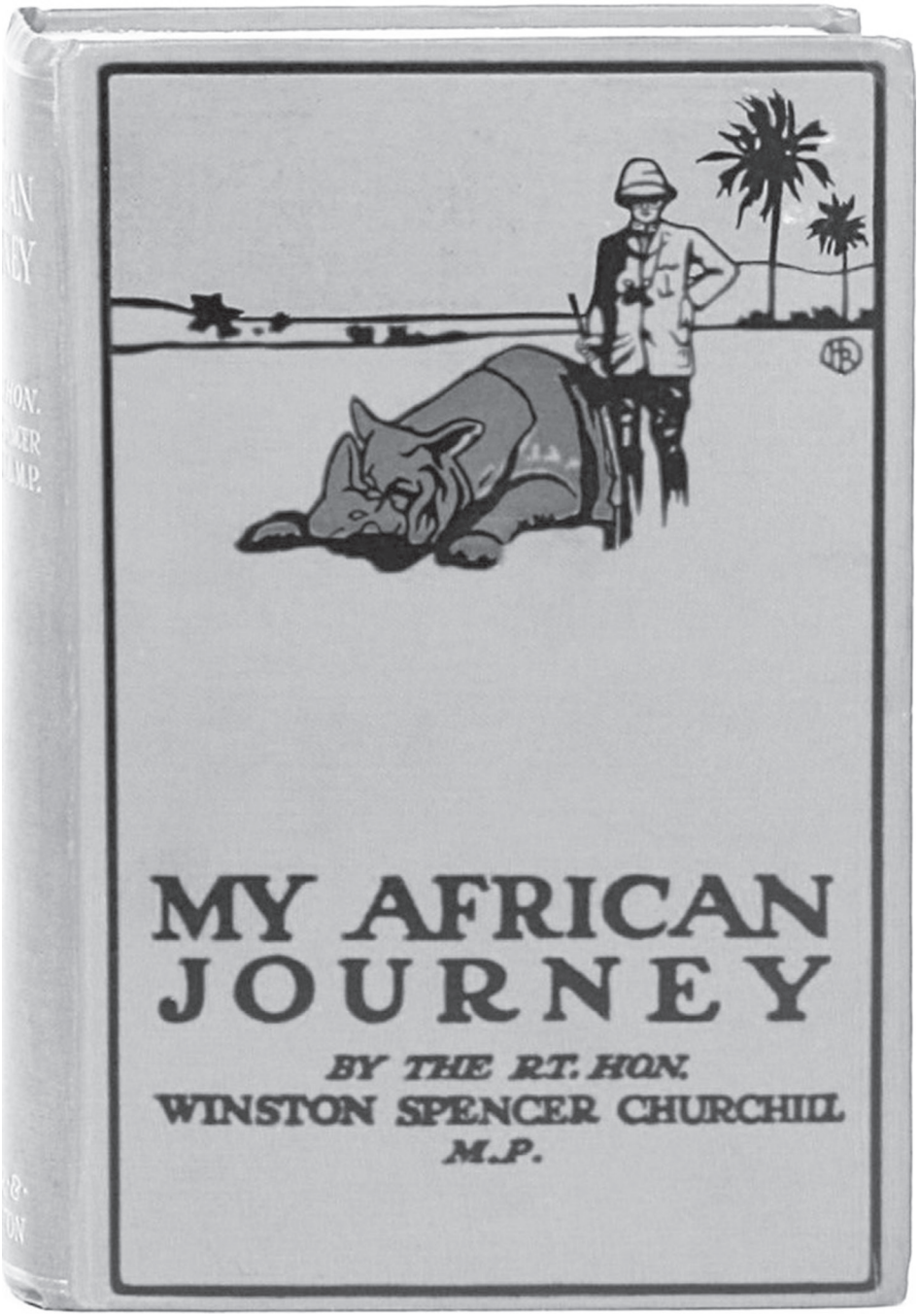
One more memorable if uncomfortable political poem by Kipling had been published the year the Boer War began, but 'The White Man's Burden' was about another war, and addressed to another nation; as is too often forgotten, its subtitle is 'The United States and the Philippine Islands'. While congratulating the Americans, Kipling adjured them to accept their imperial mission, when they would be dealing with 'Your new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child.' And he warned that, by taking up that white man's burden, the American would 'reap his old reward':

> The blame of those ye better,
> The hate of those ye guard –
> The cry of hosts ye humour
> (Ah, slowly!) towards the light:–
> 'Why brought ye us from bondage,
> 'Our loved Egyptian night?'

In sharp contradiction to Kipling, Mark Twain had no wish to succeed the British in any imperial role. He abhorred what his country had done to the people of the Philippines as much as what the British had done to the Boers, and so he finished introducing his English guest with the playfully reproachful words: 'We are kin. And now that we are kin in sin, there is nothing more to be desired.'

'The only thing that worries me in life is money,' Churchill had told his brother Jack in 1898. 'We shall finish up stone broke.' But as 1901 began, his prospects brightened. 'I am very proud of the fact that there is not one person in a million who at my age could have earned £10,000 without any capital in less than two years.' He would need it, and making money would remain one of his central preoccupations for decades to come. He was trying to make more money lecturing in Winnipeg on 22 January 1901, when he heard the long-expected news of the death of Queen Victoria, at the age of eighty-one after a reign of more than sixty-three years, the longest in English or British history, until Elizabeth II overtook her in September 2015. A new reign began with the new century, and for Churchill a new life.

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MY AFRICAN JOURNEY

BY THE RT. HON.
WINSTON SPENCER CHURCHILL
M.P.

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2

'The transatlantic type of demagogue'
Blenheim 1908

In London there is a square named after a battle, with Nelson, the victor of Trafalgar, standing high above it, and a railway station named after another, Waterloo.* But there is only one great country house named after a battle. It was at Blenheim Palace, his ancestral home, where Churchill said that he had taken the two most important decisions in his life: to be born in 1874, and to get married. Having been turned down by three women already, he met Clementine Hozier and proposed marriage while they were staying at Blenheim in 1908. And yet Blenheim and the man for whom it was built, the first Duke of Marlborough, really played a much larger part in his life, and his constant struggle for reputation and vindication.

But to begin at the beginning. Sir Winston Churchill was born in 1620. His father, John Churchill of Wootton Glanville in Dorset, had married Sarah, the daughter of Sir Henry Winston of Standish in Gloucestershire, thereby ensuring that Sir Henry's surname would one day become the most famous forename in the world. It was never used outside the family until Sir Winston's descendant and namesake made it universally recognisable, was known as 'Winston' to friend, foe and stranger, and had his name conferred admiringly on men as various as Denis Winston Healey, John Winston Howard and John Winston Lennon. The first Sir Winston was a country gentleman and a minor public official; like his father, he fought on the royalist side in the Civil War, and he then became a Member of Parliament after the Restoration of 1660, was knighted, and died in 1688. Far more significantly, he fathered three remarkable sons and a daughter. Arabella Churchill became the mistress of the Duke of York and bore

* Paris makes a defiant point with a station named for another battle, the Gare d'Austerlitz, as well as a metro station for one more, Stalingrad.

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him several children, while one of her brothers became an admiral and the other a general. But it was the third brother who achieved European renown.

Born in 1650, John Churchill rose to greatness as soldier, courtier and turncoat. In 1685 the Roman Catholic Duke of York succeeded his brother King Charles II to become James II, but not for long. Lord Churchill, as John now was, joined the group of Whig nobles who deserted their rightful king, and saw the Protestant William of Orange, James's nephew, and son-in-law through his marriage to James's daughter Mary, installed in his place. Those who made it called this the Glorious Revolution, claiming that they had saved England from popery and absolutism and preserved the Protestant religion and constitutional government, although they also made themselves much richer and more powerful in the process. The Churchills now joined the ruling elite. In the new century, serving Queen Anne, James's other daughter, who came to the throne in 1702, John Churchill achieved the highest fame, and the highest rank in the peerage as Duke of Marlborough, as well as Freiherr of Mindelheim and Prince of the Holy Roman Empire. These titles were won by his prowess as the greatest military commander of his age, leading the armies of the Grand Alliance – England, Prussia, Savoy and the Dutch Republic – in the War of Spanish Succession against the overmighty Louis XIV of France. Every English schoolboy once knew 'BROM', the mnemonic for Marlborough's quartet of victories from 1704 to 1709, Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenarde and Malplaquet.

All this excited the brilliant scorn of the greatest English popular historian of Victoria's reign. One of the books Churchill had read in Bangalore was *The History of England*, that masterpiece of historical imagination and English prose by Thomas Babington Macaulay, with its brilliant and brutal portrait of Marlborough as an unscrupulous, avaricious scoundrel. Vindicating his father's memory would be one task Churchill set himself; vindicating his earlier ancestor's would be another – and above all vindicating himself. One day Winston Churchill too would be called a deserter, abandoning not king but party, and not once but twice, which gave a sharper edge to his angry defence of his fickle forebear. And with his perennial taste for conflating of past and present, he would use the sonorous name of *The Grand Alliance* as the title of one of his volumes about another war, describing how a combination undreamt of by Marlborough, between Great

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Britain, Soviet Russia and the United States, defeated another and more terrible domination of Europe.

When a magnificent palace near Woodstock in Oxfordshire was offered as the state's reward to the duke for his famous victory, the duchess had wanted Sir Christopher Wren, greatest of English architects, to design it, but the duke chose on a whim Sir John Vanbrugh, a fashionable playwright and amateur architect who had worked with the wonderfully original Nicholas Hawksmoor. It was Hawksmoor who completed Blenheim after Vanbrugh fell out with the Marlboroughs, but it doesn't match the delicate beauty of Easton Neston, Hawksmoor's gem in Northamptonshire, or the awesome grandeur of his mausoleum at Castle Howard in Yorkshire. And as Alexander Pope observed at the time, Blenheim has always felt more monument than home:

> Thanks, Sir, cry'd I, 'tis very fine.
> But where d'ye sleep, or where d'ye dine?
> I find by all you have been telling,
> That 'tis a house, but not a dwelling.

With his formidable wife Sarah, Marlborough had several children. Their favourite son and best hope, also John, went to King's College, Cambridge, where he died of smallpox at seventeen, with his grief-stricken parents at his bedside. No other sons survived. What happened to the family and the titles after Duke John died in 1722 had a ring of what one of Oscar Wilde's characters says: 'You should read the *Peerage*. It's the best thing in fiction the English have done.' When the duke's daughter Henrietta married the Earl of Godolphin she became a countess, but now, thanks to an elaborate legal provision, she also became Duchess of Marlborough in her own right: hence the oddity that there was a first and a third Duke of Marlborough, but no second. Henrietta had a son who predeceased her without issue, leaving her younger sister Anne, who had married Lord Spencer. He became Earl of Sunderland, and their son became third Duke of Marlborough.

For several generations the family name of the dukes remained Spencer, until quietly changed to Spencer-Churchill as a reminder of past glories, despite the absence of any direct descent in the male line from the victor of Blenheim. Altogether Winston Churchill's family chronicle was replete with the story-telling, rewritten history and invented tradition which would be prominent in his own political and

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literary career. A younger brother of the third duke was himself ennobled, as first Earl Spencer. Apart from the fifth earl, who sat in Gladstone's last Cabinet, the Spencers then minded their own business until 1981, when Lady Diana Spencer, daughter of the eighth earl, married the Prince of Wales in St Paul's Cathedral. And so Prince William of Wales, next heir to the throne, who was made Duke of Cambridge at his marriage in 2011, is one more descendant of the victor of Blenheim.

Through most of the Hanoverian and Victorian years the dukes of Marlborough were notable for their obscurity, or worse. The third, fourth and fifth dukes were 'profligate even by the standards of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', and if life is getting and spending, as Wordsworth said, then the Marlboroughs were much better at spending than at getting. Compared with grandees like the Dukes of Devonshire and Bedford, who'd been in the game longer, the Marlboroughs didn't have so much land anyway, even before the seventh duke sold a large part of his estates in Wiltshire and Shropshire. Then he sold more land in Buckinghamshire to Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild for £220,000, the family jewels for 35,000 guineas, and the great Sunderland library for £56,581, a sale so legally fraught that it required an Act of Parliament. Finally, after the eighth duke succeeded in1883, another great collection, the Old Master paintings at Blenheim, was disposed of for £350,000.

Briefly a Cabinet minister under Lord Derby and then Disraeli, the seventh duke had married a daughter of the Marquess of Londonderry, which would have important consequences for his grandson Winston. As well as six daughters, he had two sons, the Marquess of Blandford, who became eighth duke, and Lord Randolph Churchill. Neither brother was long lived: the eighth duke died in 1892 and was succeeded by his son, Churchill's first cousin 'Sunny', who married Consuelo Vanderbilt. She had a son in 1897, who would succeed his father in 1934, but for the five years between the eighth duke's death and that boy's birth, Winston Churchill was heir presumptive to the dukedom. If Sunny had died without begetting an heir, Churchill would have become Duke of Marlborough, and would never have sat in the House of Commons, let alone become prime minister.

As it was, he entered the Commons, where he would sit for more than sixty years. In early 1901, Churchill returned to London and took the oath as a Member of Parliament for the first time of many, before

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he made his maiden speech on 18 February. It contained a chivalrous aside – 'and if I were a Boer, I hope I should be fighting in the field' – which chivalrous words caused deep Tory resentment. That awful ignoble campaign still wore on, with more and more women and children dying in the camps. What the Liberal leader Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman bravely condemned as 'methods of barbarism' persisted only thanks to the wretchedly narrow-minded High Commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner, who had helped engineer the war in the first place and now insisted that there should be no amnesty for 'Cape rebels' – Boers in the Cape Colony who were technically British subjects but who had understandably sided with their fellow Afrikaners.

Now Commander-in-Chief in South Africa, Kitchener wrote in March to St John Brodrick, the Secretary for War, that Milner's views 'may be strictly just, but they are to my mind vindictive,' and that to prolong the war 'seems to me absurd and wrong'. Churchill agreed. 'This miserable war, unfortunate and ill-omened in its beginning, inglorious in its course, cruel and hideous in its conclusion,' he called it in a letter to Milner himself. 'I have hated these latter stages with their barbarous features.' The Boers 'must be helped to rebuild their farms; the gold mines must do that. What more fitting function for the wealth of South African soil (better build farms in South Africa than palaces in Park Lane!*)' This change, from the happy warrior to the young MP who could now say, 'I hate and abominate all this expenditure on military armaments,' was one of his first transformations.

A series of great issues had riven British politics in Lord Randolph's lifetime and since, splitting parties within as well as distinguishing them without. Irish Home Rule was the only question which really separated Winston from the Liberals, or so he had told his mother, just as it had brought together the Tories and the Liberal opponents of Home Rule, now conveniently designated as Unionists. The Boer War caused another rift within the Liberal Party between the imperialists of the Liberal League who supported the war and the faction dubbed (not quite fairly) 'pro-Boers' who opposed the war, none more prominent than the Welsh firebrand David Lloyd George. Some of

* A number of the Randlords had acquired houses in Park Lane or elsewhere in Mayfair.

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the most bitter political battles in the first years of the new century were sectarian, with the Dissenters, Methodists, Congregationalists and others, who were so strong in the Liberal Party, fighting for the disestablishment of the Episcopalian Church in Wales and for an end to Anglican control of education. That left Churchill cold, as did all religious questions.

But the other inescapable question was Free Trade against Protection, where he remained a passionate Free Trader. In 1903, Chamberlain raised the banner of 'tariff reform', Protection by any other name, and he was clearly determined to impose this on the Tories, at risk of splitting the party as he had split the Liberals over Home Rule. Once Balfour succeeded as prime minister, Churchill's relationship with his own party deteriorated rapidly, as became actually visible. Political drama in the House of Commons has always been heightened by its history and physical shape. Its original home was St Stephen's Chapel in the mediaeval Palace of Westminster, and so MPs don't debate in a semicircle of seats like the House of Representatives or the French Assembly (whose seating from the time of the Revolution gave us the potent if often misleading political metaphor of Left and Right) but facing each other across the floor as in the original chapel stalls.

As Churchill's criticisms of the government became sharper, they were more and more resented until, one day when he was speaking in the Commons, Balfour, on the Treasury Bench, stood up and walked out, followed by many other Tory MPs. The Unionist whip was then withdrawn from the Member for Oldham, and on 31 May 1904 Churchill 'crossed the floor': he entered the Chamber, walked towards the Speaker's Chair, bowed, and then turned right instead of left to sit on the Opposition benches, from which he would savagely attack the party he had just deserted. For the Tories he was now 'the Blenheim rat', and it did look as though he was leaving a sinking ship. Shipping water from the Chamberlain explosion, Balfour's ministry listed and lurched until December 1905, when he resigned, daring Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the Liberal leader, to take office in his place. This was a long-standing tactical gambit, as in 1873 when Gladstone resigned, but Disraeli had seen a trap and declined to take over. This time Campbell-Bannerman accepted the challenge. He formed a new ministry and asked for a dissolution of Parliament, followed by an election in the new year. It was a Liberal landslide, and a new dawn,

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with a government of new men for a new age. Churchill's reward for changing parties came straight away, when he was made Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Colonies. The position was all the more important since the new Secretary of State, Churchill's chief, was Lord Elgin sitting in the Upper House, and so Churchill was responsible for colonial questions in the Commons.

Abandoning the Tories meant that Churchill had to leave Oldham and find a Liberal seat. North-East Manchester had already been proffered to him, and he now gladly accepted, with one unforeseen but most important consequence. His new constituency had a large Jewish population: not a majority, as some historians have suggested, but substantial. That suited Churchill, who had been brought up to share his father's philosemitism, a contrast indeed to many Englishmen of his age and class like his cousin the Duke of Marlborough, who would respond to a hostile review of Churchill's life of Lord Randolph in the *Daily Telegraph* by saying that he wanted 'to administer a good and sound trouncing to that dirty little Hebrew' Harry Levy-Lawson, the owner of the paper. Churchill had inherited his father's friendship with the Rothschilds, and as a young man spent so much time with them and other rich Jewish acquaintances like Baron de Forrest that his son Randolph would write many years later with heavy-handed humour that 'During this period he was sometimes invited into Gentile society.'

Already Churchill had won the golden opinions of the *Jewish Chronicle*. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, Jews living in the Russian empire had been tormented by a wave of persecution, with another recrudescence only recently, most notoriously seen in the savage Kishinev pogrom of 1903. This had stimulated a great migration of Jews to the west, mostly across the Atlantic but some to England, and in response the Balfour government had introduced an Aliens Bill to staunch immigration. Churchill had opposed the Bill, and now spoke at a meeting in Manchester to protest against the pogroms. It led to a fateful meeting, a new friendship, and a theme that would echo through his life, making Churchill a Jewish hero who would still be honoured from Jerusalem to New York in the twenty-first century.

Another speaker that evening was Chaim Weizmann, whose day job was as a research chemist at Manchester University, but whose emotional energy was directed towards the Zionist movement he

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would one day lead and the creation of a Jewish state whose first president he would be. Born three days before Churchill, though in a White Russian shtetl rather than a palace, Weizmann was a dreamer, a luftmensch, or even a fantasist: he told Dorothy Rothschild, an English supporter, that he had helped defend the Jewish quarter in Kishinev during the pogrom, when he was undoubtedly in Geneva at the time. But then Churchill was a luftmensch himself, and the sheer romantic dream of 'restoring' the Jews spoke powerfully to him. He was captivated by the cause of Zionism, and from the beginning, he emphatically saw Zionism as a colonial enterprise which would benefit his own country and its imperial mission. As early as 1908 he thought that 'the establishment of a strong, free Jewish state astride the bridge between Europe and Africa, flanking the land roads to the East, would not only be an immense advantage to the British Empire, but a notable step towards the harmonious disposition of the world among its peoples,' one dream which conspicuously did not come true.

The election coincided with publication of Churchill's two-volume biography of his father. His improbable but remarkably effective literary agent was Frank Harris,* who secured a breathtaking advance of £8000, more than the prime minister's salary. In many ways it's an accomplished and enjoyable book, for all its absurdities: his son claimed that Lord Randolph had struggled as hard as Disraeli to make his way in politics, with 'No smooth path of patronage', as if there were any comparison between the outlandish grandson of Jewish immigrants and the son of a duke.

What interest the book retains lies in its method and its purpose, and what it says about the son as much as the father. Unusually among European languages, English has distinct words for 'story' and 'history' rather than the same word for both: '*Was für eine Geschichte*!' means 'What a story!' rather than 'an excellent history book', and *une histoire* can be tittle-tattle in the street as well as a work of historical scholarship. For Winston Churchill, there was never any distinction. History meant telling a story, a drama which was often melodrama, with heroes and villains, all thrown into relief by his gift for language. And he always wrote as a partisan and advocate, with a case to make, on behalf of his subject, though on behalf of himself as well. As Peter

* Now mostly remembered for his lewd memoirs, but in his day an outstanding magazine editor, as well as a general literary factotum.

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Clarke has noted, that first biography managed to be not only 'an explicit defence of Lord Randolph's career in loyally sticking with the Conservative Party in the 1880s but also as an implicit apologia for Winston's action in abandoning it twenty years later'.

More disturbing were the distortions and omissions, beyond the call of filial duty. Even serious biographies weren't then expected to carry an apparatus of notes and references, and so the reader was left dependent on the writer's good faith. Churchill had been granted privileged access to documentary sources, at Blenheim and elsewhere, and he used them very capriciously. One reviewer who had known and worked with Lord Randolph rightly said that Winston had played down his father's lack of principle and knack of changing positions. In his own far more scholarly and detached biography,* Roy Foster has shown how Churchill would distort the effect of documents by cutting passages without suggesting any omission.

One alarming example can stand for others: selective quotation of a letter from Lord Dufferin, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, implies that he supported Lord Randolph's position, when 'in fact, the original reads in a directly contrary sense'. Lord Randolph's letters are polished and embellished to improve them, inconvenient facts are ignored, and all in all, 'a great weight of minor alterations and major emphases combined to produce a portrait in the painting of which Churchill not only discovered his father, but refashioned him in his own image'. The harshest verdict on the biography came from the White House. 'I dislike the father and dislike the son,' said President Theodore Roosevelt. Both Randolph and Winston possessed 'such levity, lack of sobriety, lack of permanent principle, and an inordinate thirst for that cheap form of admiration which is given to notoriety, as to make them poor public servants', thought 'TR', and Winston's book was 'A clever, forceful, rather cheap and vulgar life of that clever, forceful, rather cheap and vulgar egoist.'

In England the reception was warmer than that, and seemed to enhance Churchill's standing in his new office, which now afforded another friendship. Jan Smuts, Boer general, scholar and thinker, at least by repute, came to London to negotiate the restoration of responsible government to the Transvaal. That is to say for its white inhabitants: this condition had been implicit in the Treaty of Vereeniging

* *Lord Randolph Churchill: A Political Life*, R.F. Foster (Oxford 1981)

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