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## MR. CHURCHILL AS BIOGRAPHER: HIS "MARLBOROUGH"

*The great and good do not die even in this world. Embalmed  
in books, their spirits walk abroad.* —SAMUEL SMILES.

*A Life well written is almost as rare as a life well spent.*  
—CARLYLE.

BY HERBERT L. STEWART

IT is seldom indeed that the same man exhibits talent of the very highest quality both as a speaker and as a writer. The warmest admirers of the late Lord Birkenhead or of David Lloyd George on the platform would not have claimed for him that he was a wizard with his pen. Enthusiasts for Bernard Shaw's plays or Anatole France's novels felt disappointment (like that of the devout reader of St. Paul's *Epistles*)<sup>1</sup> when they first heard the author speak. An orator risks his reputation when he allows reports of his masterpieces in parliament or in a public hall to be collected in a volume; so rarely, as Lord Rosebery said in reference to Pitt, will the electrical effect produced on an audience "bear the colorless photography of a printed record".<sup>2</sup> There have been exceptional men, indeed, such as Macaulay, who shone in both rôles. Perhaps it is suggestive that Mr. Churchill, whose style is so like Macaulay's, is also among such exceptions. Can it be that the particular type of linguistic talent which these two Englishmen have shared lends itself more than other types both to brilliant writing and to brilliant speaking?

1. II *Corinthians* X, 10.

2. Cf. Rosebery, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, pp. 82, 83

It is with one of Mr. Churchill's books that this article is concerned—his biography of Marlborough.

## I

The two *Lives* he chose to write were those of men whose careers had been military and political. It was natural and profitable that he should make such choice, for politics and war were his own ruling interests in study of the past, and within such limits he was likely to write best. He wrote of leaders in battle and in parliament with exhaustive knowledge of detail, skill in interpretation, never-failing felicity of descriptive phrase. Of generals and of statesmen it was his delight to show how they had matched their ingenious wits against each other, how they had dexterously taken advantage of each other's mistakes, how they had chosen or failed to choose the most propitious fighting ground. Threading his way through records, whether of the early eighteenth or of the early twentieth century, he was ever on the search for some secret (military or political) that had been missed, and for lack of which the story had not "made sense". But though such was his immediate interest, his design carried him far beyond it, and his biographies have thus indirectly a far deeper value than they superficially claim. He may be examining the geographic conditions of Blenheim or Malplaquet; he may be analyzing the currents of public temper by which Tory rule was broken at Westminster in 1880 and Liberal rule there five years afterwards; but much more is implied than is explicitly drawn out in these new stories of events long past. His *Marlborough* and his *Lord Randolph Churchill*, not less than his histories of the two World Wars, serve by their careful reexamination of data to cast new light on the whole character, national and social, of the period with which they deal.

No doubt the author regards his *Marlborough* as his more important biography. An impartial critic may prefer his *Lord Randolph*, and may judge that the value of the more elaborate work lies less in its biographic picture than in its pictures of military manoeuvring over country after country of early eighteenth century Europe. Mr. Churchill was strenuously engaged on this history during his period of comparative leisure from public affairs, when settlement after the First World War was thought complete and apprehensions of the Second were not yet acute. The period was in another sense an interval.

I shall endeavour to point out in the *Marlborough* signs of the writer's characteristic mood during the years which separated an enthusiasm which had abated from a different enthusiasm which would later inspire him. But in dominant ideas he had not changed nor would he ever change. He had time and inclination for a literary enterprise on a large scale, and by personal taste as well as by family interest he was drawn to this one. What could have been more attractive than the record of Marlborough's campaigns to one who had all his life had such passion for tracing the course of great military adventure, as a chess enthusiast might review a complicated game, pointing out where the judgement of a player had been at fault and his opponent had profited by the opportunity? For one, too, so intensely an Englishman, the picture of so many national perils victoriously confronted by martial England was a joy to sketch. These motives were reinforced by the proud reflection that the hero of the book was a Churchill, of his own kith and kin, especially as a famous historical artist of nearly a century before, to whom Marlborough was no hero, had drawn a picture which placed him in a humiliating light. A kinsman's indignation called for exposure of Macaulay as "a literary rogue."

One must regret that he yielded so much to this impulse. What is worth doing suffers by being overdone, and the reader may well see this exemplified in the exposure of Macaulay. Often indeed the indignant critic has scored, marshalling examples of graceful imagery or mordant satire which disguise exaggeration or perversion of fact. Augustine Birrell said of Macaulay that he had adopted a style of writing in which it was impossible to tell the truth. The "mad foreshortenings and irrelevant emphasis" which Lytton Strachey used to deplore (and also to perpetrate!) are inevitable in that technique of linguistic symmetry, with its ever ready antithesis and epigram, to which the record of drab fact about irresolute and changeable human nature does not lend itself. But Mr. Churchill in his refutation is as fairly chargeable with such theoretical faults as Macaulay in the indictment he aims to refute. Diverting indeed is the spectacle of arraignment and defence of Marlborough set forth with so closely similar devices of narrative, of metaphor, of sarcasm, of sportive ridicule and righteous indignation. But the austere requirements of history are forgotten by both alike. Mr. Churchill, like Macaulay, tries to prove too much. For when we have discounted all that is

fairly disputable in the shocking stories of Marlborough, quite enough remains of undisputed wickedness to make the reader feel that the biographer is "whitewashing". If Mr. Churchill had been a London lawyer, practising in the Courts when William III sent Marlborough to the Tower, and had been briefed for the defence in the trial, his resourceful industry in the search for weak points of the indictment, and for mitigating circumstances to justify a light sentence, would be admirable. Often the reader of the biography must exclaim "What a triumph that writer would have had at the bar!" But such defence advocacy, however skilful, is no function of an historian writing two hundred years later about a servant of the Crown who manifestly betrayed in turn two kings to each of whom he had sworn allegiance, an adviser who used his opportunities of trust to undermine the interest he had undertaken to promote, a commander who deserted to the enemy on the eve of the battle. Probably Marlborough was suspected of many a dark intrigue of which he was guiltless. Quite as likely he engaged in much of the sort which never came to light. But excuses for him drawn from the low character of his Age, when all men were rogues alike, make one impatient like Dr. Johnson with the minute moral accountancy of Boswell over the question whether Voltaire or Rousseau was the worse man. "Why, sir," said Johnson, "it is difficult to settle the proportion of iniquity between them".<sup>3</sup>

Another Marlborough enthusiast cannot find that anyone of the period in question blamed a soldier for double dealing, and insists that the historians of our time "equipped with consciences unconceived and inconceivable in the seventeenth century" might as well blame the men of two hundred years ago for using candles instead of electric bulbs.<sup>4</sup> Thus fidelity taking the place of perfidy is depicted as a mere development in technique! And what generation was this which the biographer found so dissolute as to make inevitable his hero's lapse from the standards now a commonplace of duty? It was the generation in which Somers was applying to government the noble principles he had been taught by Locke, Newton was taking time from his world-transforming discoveries in physics to compose devotional books, the Church of England had in Tillotson and Stillingfleet, Cudworth and Burnet leaders of such mark intellectually and morally as made the late seventeenth century a period her historians are proud to recall, while

3. Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, II, p. 108.

4. D. B. Chidsey, *Marlborough*, p. 159.

in Nonconformist circles Milton was writing *Paradise Lost*, Bunyan *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Baxter *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*. Mr. Churchill's chapter entitled "The Jovial Times" needs a supplement if the proportionate influences are not to be misconceived. Marlborough was not indeed, as Macaulay said of Milton, "undisturbed by the obscene tumult that raged around him," but to excuse all he did on the ground that no one else of his time was making any more serious resistance to the debasements of the Court is special pleading, not genuine history. Curiously enough, Mr. Churchill himself, in a section of his biography written to his hero's advantage on quite the opposite ground, has a very different account of "the Age". He insists that the men of that period had a moral sensitiveness much finer than ours, and quotes Marlborough's proclamation of immunity for genuine non-combatants in France and Spain as showing on how much higher moral level than that of our time he directed belligerent operations. "In the twentieth century," the satiric biographer writes, "mankind has shaken itself free from all those illogical, old-world prejudices, and achieved the highest efficiency of brutal, ruthless war."<sup>5</sup> This is indeed making the best of both worlds for the repute of John Churchill. His enthusiastic kinsman must not expect us to acquiesce in his "having it so many ways round at once." At the same time, one enjoys the linguistic brilliance of the apologia, because it so alleviates the tedium of an argument which none could have rendered convincing and very few could have rendered so plausible.

The outstanding achievement, however, of this biography is its picture of Marlborough not in precarious service of King William III (with whom his relations were always those of mutual dislike and distrust), but in his work under Queen Anne for the Grand Alliance against Louis XIV, when his genius for strategy both military and political saved the freedom of Europe. Little can the biographer in those middle 1930's, when engaged on this book, have dreamed in how many respects he would himself have to shoulder a burden of the same sort. But constantly readers of the *Marlborough* now must feel how valuable were the studies involved in its composition as preparing its writer for the task he would so soon have to confront.

## II

Somewhat far on in life for such a change, Mr. Churchill took up painting as a hobby. It was not so great a change,

5. W. S. Churchill, *Marlborough* II, p. 98.

however, as at first sight might appear. In a sense he was always a painter. Scenes of Nature, not human portraits, have of late challenged his skill with the brush. But with a pen he had long been engaged on portraits, and the *Marlborough* is a brilliant effort in this field.

It is indeed an arresting, an unforgettable figure that looks out upon us from that four-volume canvas; a figure whose environing circumstances are sketched with copious knowledge and deft literary skill. First we are shown a most unfortunate heritage—one born into a family that the Civil War had split into hostile sections, and hence during the hollow “peace” of the Restoration habituated from childhood to crafty, evasive forms of speech. A period of such fierce recoil from the Cromwellian Puritanism that moral restraint was the favorite butt of jest, and the atmosphere of fashionable society (following the royal example) was an atmosphere of competitive licentiousness! How the children of an aristocratic English family, under the lurid radiance of Charles II’s Court, were influenced by such prevailing habits, is vividly set forth. At times it seems almost to be argued that John Churchill and his sister Arabella could not, under the circumstances of their position, have been expected to behave otherwise than as they did towards Lady Castlemaine and the Duke of York respectively! The biographer of course does not intend this, but his chapter on “The Jovial Times” comes dangerously near to suggesting it.

Next we watch the young English soldier on his first military service, when in fulfilment of the secret *Treaty of Dover* the British forces cooperated with the French for conquest of Holland, in order that Charles II might be able to draw on Louis XIV for supplies which would make him independent of parliament. The young soldier, of course, could not be expected to know or enquire about the reason why he had to prosecute the siege of those Dutch cities, any more than his kinsman-biographer, when serving at about the same age two hundred years later under Kitchener in the Soudan, asked any questions about the “justice” of the campaign against the Mahdi. “I know not,” wrote the author of *The River War*, “how a genuine may be distinguished from a spurious prophet except by the measure of his success.”<sup>6</sup> So it depended on whether the French or the Dutch forces proved the stronger, and the verdict which had inclined one way after the French victories would change

6. *The River War*, p. 34.

if the Dutch should prevail by opening their dykes! But the John Churchill whom this biography presents was not, at that age at least, bothering about moral valuations. Like Bishop Nicholas in Ibsen's *Pretenders*, he could say "I am in a state of innocence; I know no difference between good and evil." Marshal Turenne highly commended him for the professional skill which, regardless of moral crotchets, he displayed.

The growing embarrassments of such "innocence" are shown as the portrait-painter traces the evolution of his hero under the next two British kings. Neither to James II nor to William III did the variations in John Churchill's loyalty seem phenomena of sheer innocence. But, as the biographer sees it, neither of these monarchs did him justice. For there was developing within him loyalty to a cause which was far beyond that of any monarch, and might have to be served by summary measures with various monarchs in turn. This was the cause of the Protestant countries of Western Europe, threatened again by Louis XIV of France, as they had been by Philip II of Spain, with resubjugation to the Papacy. Of the "Grand Alliance" to resist such an attack Marlborough conceived that England could and should take the leadership. His much denounced "betrayal" of the trust reposed in him by James II is shown as having had its prelude at a conversation in the garden of the Deanery at Winchester three years earlier, when his language to his sovereign was sufficiently explicit: "It is the general voice of your people that Your Majesty is paving the way for the introduction of Popery."<sup>7</sup> The king's angry rejoinder elicited only further clarification, Marlborough telling him of his own purpose to live and die a Protestant, of the resolve of nine-tenths of the English people to preserve the institutions of the Reformed Faith, and of his fear that consequences of the very gravest sort must ensue from any attempt to make them accept a different system. The king, says the narrator, turned away with a stern look, and would speak to Churchill no more that night.

In the pages which record that conversation may be found the governing idea of Mr. Churchill's whole picture of Marlborough. A man in whose record there were many blemishes—of passion, of the "tact" which is indistinguishable from deceit, of the covetousness in mature years developed from what Dickens called "the dismal precocity of poverty": but a man also whose genius in war and high talent in diplomacy were

7. *Marlborough*, I pp. 242, 3.

combined with the most generous human sympathies, a model husband when his storms of adolescence in a particularly licentious period were passed, and—above all—devoted to one cause, that of building the greatness of England upon her leadership of the countries of the Reformed Faith in yet another fight like the fight led by William the Silent and Gustavus Adolphus. The ten years of war (during which, as Voltaire said, Marlborough never fought a battle which he did not win or besieged a city which he did not capture) are interpreted in this picture as the years during which he achieved for England a prestige that would endure for two centuries. Stories of intrigue against him at home threatening to disable him abroad, of the plots which he frustrated by counter-plots, of the dexterity with which he manoeuvred party groups at Westminster as if they were military detachments in the field, are all made to illustrate this central conception, and even those who demur most strongly to its soundness must agree that it is worked out with power, that an unforgettable figure (whether of the historic Marlborough or not) has been painted, and that the political and social life of England in a memorable period has been depicted with masterly skill.

It has been said that a good portrait is one which shows a face in characteristic or habitual expression, not in a merely capricious or transient mood.<sup>7</sup> Lady Haig complained that the statue of her husband, while true in expression to a mood she had sometimes known, was contradictory of his *characteristic* mood. Did Mr. Churchill thus present Marlborough as he was fundamentally or only as from time to time he showed impulses which generosity could thus construe? Was his, or was Macaulay's, as tried by Lady Haig's test, the better portrait? Was it the malice of a Victorian Whig that impelled the earlier to traduce, or the partiality of an imperialist kinsman that impelled the later to idealize? Macaulay had certainly the easier job, with material for his structure at once accessible, and his critic's first task was to demolish what had thus been built. The reader who has to say to Mr. Churchill, in the language of Agrippa to St. Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me" acknowledges at least a great literary masterpiece. And most readers will feel almost, if not altogether, persuaded.

### III

The eighteenth century, wrote Mark Pattison, was the century whose poetry was without romance, whose philosophy

8. Cf. *Last Lectures of Wilfred Ward*.

was without insight and whose public men were without character—"whose very merits, were of the earth, earthy."<sup>9</sup> Marlborough's life included its first twenty-two years, and his biographer set forth admirably his devices of self-adjustment in the atmosphere of the Court of Queen Anne, amid the intrigues of Harley and Bolingbroke and Abigail Hill, the frauds of the South Sea Scheme, the mania stirred by Sacheverell, the ceaseless anxieties about Jacobite plotting, with uncertainty as to which Ministers were loyal to the dynasty they served and which were covert agents of the dethroned king. Mr. Churchill described that unwholesome social situation, vividly indeed, but in no such terms of disgust as it has drawn from so many others—from men so different as Thomas Carlyle and John Henry Newman, alike in scornful attitude to the eighteenth century. In the *Marlborough* there is rather an undertone of allowance for the faults which these austere critics branded, a disposition to explain away the claims of moral superiority in the political leaders of any period compared with those of another period, a touch of sympathy with a generation for which "enthusiasm" was a contemptuous word. It is thus quite unlike such a book as the biography of Lord Randolph written thirty years before, or the history of the Second World War written a dozen years later. Was it contemporary British politics that made the writer's mood more indulgent to the record of politicians in the past?

Not for a moment do I suggest (as was not merely suggested but fiercely insisted by his political opponents of that period) that in the late 1930's Mr. Churchill's own loss of Cabinet office made him lose enthusiasm and even respect for the parliamentary institutions of the country. That indeed he never lost, whatever his personal fortunes. No one can be named who, throughout our troubled half-century, has been more steadfast both in preaching and in exhibiting faith in representative government. He has consistently loved the House of Commons, where he took many hard knocks and always came back smiling. But what his publications of the late 1930's reveal seems a definite abatement of his earlier belief in a clear-cut vitally important contrast between party convictions or between party leaders. As Professor G. M. Trevelyan would put it, he began to see such things in grey, not as before in white and black. The flaming colors of his previous advocacy had been somehow toned down, as he had come to

9. *Essays and Reviews*, p. 254.

“note with keen discriminating sight,” black’s not so black, nor white so *very* white”

One can understand how the sequence of British Cabinets in the 1930’s had their effect here. Ramsay MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin, Neville Chamberlain as premiers: Sir John Simon, Sir Samuel Hoare, Lord Halifax as Foreign Secretaries, had been a severe strain on faith. Which, if any, of them was a superman? Were they not all exasperatingly alike, in meaning no particular harm but doing no particular good? It was during the period when he was haunted by such memories that Mr. Churchill wrote his *Marlborough*. If he thought of the intriguers at the Court of Queen Anne as like those with whom he had had to work successively in Liberal and Conservative cabinets, he might well set in high relief the qualities which made Marlborough so superior to others in purpose as well as in talent. I think he overdid those qualities in his literary portrait, but it was doubtless his experiences of the present, as much as records of the past, that led him to such judgement in the world of politics.

In those chapters of the first volume of the *Marlborough* which condone a multitude of faults for the sake of certain commanding talents there may be a failure of moral nerve. But it was no more than a temporary failure. Enthusiasm came back to Mr. Churchill with a flood, and its return was his country’s salvation.