

DALHOUSIE REVIEW

Volume 31

WINTER, 1952

No. 4

MR. CHURCHILL AS HIS FATHER'S BIOGRAPHER

By HERBERT L. STEWART

Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.
ECCLESIASTICUS.

He had the defects without which nothing is genuine.

THOMAS HARDY.

*A racehorse is remembered, not by his defeats, but by the races
he has won.*

MONTAIGNE.

FORTY-FIVE years ago, when he had just entered on his thirties, Mr. Churchill published his *Life* of his father, whose early career his own had up to that date (1905) so strikingly resembled. As one now re-reads the book, the question constantly suggests itself "Would the author write that now?"

His political enemies often say that Mr. Churchill has abandoned his fundamental principles not merely once but twice, and their insinuation is that he never had principles, but only devices of political strategy.¹ The thesis of this article is that re-examination of that *Life* of his father, replete as it is with his own judgments of 1905 on national affairs, reveals far less of contrast than of surprising agreement between his ways of thinking then and the Toryism either of his extreme youth or of his present mellow age.

I

His *Lord Randolph Churchill* was pronounced by Lord Rosebery one of the dozen best, perhaps one of the half-dozen best,

1. E.g. the remark of Mr. Aneurin Bevan about "a man who has turned on so many of his party's leaders."

biographies in the English language.² This was high praise indeed, from so discerning a critic. To describe and analyze the international scene and the British domestic scene of the years 1874-1886 (the period within which Lord Randolph's whole active public life fell) was an enterprise for which Mr. Churchill proved well equipped by natural talent. He likewise showed such detailed and accurate knowledge as it was notable that one whose serious study of affairs had not begun until he was twenty-six should have accumulated before he was thirty.

It was on a biography of his father, not on the history of public events between 1874 and 1886, that he was engaged. But the personality of Lord Randolph could be drawn only as the reader was shown the public movements in which that intrepid spirit intervened. Movements, in turn, are most effectively grouped for interpretation round some commanding figure whose fortunes, merits and faults there is psychological interest in tracing. Mr. Churchill's knowledge of 1874 to 1886, like that possessed by later historians of the same period, was derived from records: he had been only ten years old at its close. He had the advantage, however, of discussing what took place with men who had been in the thick of the battles, military and controversial, by which that period was marked—with men as different in outlook and opinion as Lord Balfour and Lord Rosebery, John Morley and Joseph Chamberlain.

This biography presents a feature of interesting contrast with the author's other adventure in the same type of composition. As the ruling conception in the *Marlborough* is that of a leader in British foreign policy, for whom all domestic issues were relatively insignificant, so in the *Lord Randolph Churchill* the central figure is a champion of those measures of domestic reform whose refusal by obstinate traditionalists he thought a chief peril of the State. Here is the story of a young Conservative, critical of Conservatism, not—like so many of its critics—at a time when the tide was plainly flowing against it, but at a time when it seemed sure of a long period of unchallengeable power. Mr. Churchill depicts his father entering parliament in 1874, at the age of twenty-three, when Disraeli had just triumphed over Gladstone at the polls, and had driven his great antagonist—temporarily at least—into private life, leaving the Liberals to far less competent guidance. Weather seemed "Set Fair" for the Conservative Party at the time when the young

2. Rosebery, *Lord Randolph Churchill*.

Conservative member for Woodstock took his seat on a back bench.

The story tells about events moving fast during those six years of Disraeli's premiership, but of only two—the revolt of Turkey's subject races in Europe (settled by adjustments at the Congress of Berlin) and the rise of Parnellism in Ireland—as having stirred challenging thought in the mind of young Lord Randolph. For the rest, he was a docile back-bench supporter of the Administration, but his son makes it clear from his letters that (despite misgivings about such daring on the part of one so young) he was ready to initiate insurgence within the Party against Government policies both in the Balkans and in Ireland. Turkish misdeeds in the Christian countries of South-Eastern Europe had provoked revolt in which there was reason to hope for help from Russia. The rebellious provinces, especially Bulgaria, were quickly shown how much further in cruelty their Moslem overlord could proceed, but other Powers—Germany, Austria, France—became so concerned about the possible outcome as to join in what was known as “the Berlin Memorandum,” pressing upon the Porte the case for concession and reform. In this, Great Britain refused to concur, insisting that “the integrity of the Ottoman Empire” must be kept safe against Russian designs, and at Constantinople the cunning use of mutual suspicion among the members of the so-called “Concert of Europe,” to secure Turkey from intervention, scored its first success. Its success in the 1870's set the method which would in the 1890's be effectively applied again, for immunity in torturing Armenians. For some cause, which has never been satisfactorily explained (Gladstone said it was his “crypto-Judaism”)³, the British Prime Minister was specially bent on discounting the charges against Turkey and rekindling the fires of anti-Russian rage which had burned so fiercely during the Crimean War. Gladstone's pamphlet on “Bulgarian atrocities,” with his demand that Russia be given a free hand to clear the Turks “bag and baggage” out of Europe, elicited from the Leader of the Government (by that time in the House of Lords as Earl of Beaconsfield) the rejoinder that Britain had safer guides than “a sophistical rhetorician, intoxicated by the exuberance of his own verbosity!”

Mr. Churchill rendered high service, not only to his father's memory but also to our knowledge of the currents and cross-currents of feeling in the British parliament at that so critical

3. Cf. Morley, *Life of Gladstone*, Book VII, Chapt. 4.

time, by publishing the correspondence on this "Eastern crisis" between Lord Randolph and prominent members of the Liberal Opposition. For example this letter to Sir Charles Dilke, dated February 7, 1878:

My dear Sir Charles Dilke:

As I suppose this debate will come to a close with an enormous and disproportionate majority for the Government, and as I think the Opposition have made their stand on unfortunate ground, and that another fight might yet be fought with far greater chances of commanding sympathy in the country, I want to know whether, if an Address to the Crown, praying Her Majesty to use her influence at the Conference in favour of the widest possible freedom to Bulgaria, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Thessaly and Epirus, and in favour of totally and finally putting an end to direct Turkish Government in these provinces, were moved by me from the Tory side of the House, it would be supported by the Liberal Party. I think I could almost make sure of a strong Home Rule vote on this. I think some Conservatives would support it. If Northcote does not give some very clear information as to what is going to be the policy of the Government, I think a motion of this sort should be made on the Report. The real cry for the country is—not sympathy with Russia, still less with Turkey, but complete freedom for the Slav and Hellenic nationalities.

I am off to Ireland to-night. I don't care enough for the Government to vote for them . . . I shall see Butt in Dublin and shall sound him on what I have written to you. My address is Phoenix Park, Dublin.⁴

Yours truly,

RANDOLPH S. CHURCHILL

As one reads this letter now, one thinks wistfully and remorsefully of various mid-Eastern developments: of what was destined to happen twenty years later in Armenia, of the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, of Turkey's war partnership with Germany in 1914. How differently things might have turned out if this young Tory M. P. (not yet twenty-seven) had been able to effect more of what he had in mind against the policies of his too-powerful chief. And what courage, as well as wisdom and independence of thought, was shown in this proposal to break a lance against the all-powerful Beaconsfield!

The references in the letter to possible cooperation of the Irish Nationalists, and the project of seeing Butt on the matter in Dublin, are similarly suggestive. Lord Randolph's next letter to Dilke was dated "The Castle, Dublin, February 8,

4. *Life*, I, pp. 100,101.

1878." It dwelt on the need for issuing an authoritative statement that the British purpose was to promote "complete freedom and independence of the Slav nationality, as opposed to any reconstruction of the Turkish Empire."⁵ There could have been no plainer revolt from the Party chief. But no less startling was the report of conversations with Isaac Butt, leader of Irish Nationalists and inventor of the name "Home Rule" to sum up their demands. From this personal conference, wrote Lord Randolph, he had derived "great hope of securing a solid Irish vote on any proposition which might seem to favour the principle of self-government for nationalities."⁶

No wonder Isaac Butt was in a mood to cooperate. Lord Randolph was not indeed a supporter, as yet, of what he called Irish Home Rule, but nearly a year before these conversations about the Eastern crisis he had spoken about Ireland at the dinner of the Woodstock Agricultural and Horticultural Show in language which the *Morning Post* at once said might naturally have been used by Butt or even by Parnell. His warning to England that for her present trouble with Ireland she should blame her own negligences and injustices, that she had to make amends for "years of wrong, years of crime, years of tyranny, years of oppression, years of general misgovernment," was such as horrified the Cabinet, particularly the Irish Chief Secretary, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, who wrote a letter of remonstrance to the young insurgent's father about what he had dared to say to the constituents of whom he was the professedly Tory representative. This elicited from the Duke of Marlborough only a conjecture that there might have been excessive champagne or claret at the dinner! The Duke added his belief that Lord Randolph would on reflection regret what he had said, and the assurance that he had been personally much annoyed at the folly of the speech.

It was not, however, to claret or champagne at the Woodstock dinner, but to many conferences in the "Little Lodge" of the Phoenix Park with representative Irishmen that this revolt of a Churchill from the family tradition was due. The revolt was to be repeated thirty years later, by the son of the insurgent of 1878. Who could appreciate better, or sum up more convincingly, Lord Randolph's reasons for shocking Sir Michael Hicks-Beach than the Winston Churchill who had just shocked in the same manner the High Priests of English Toryism in 1904?

5. loc. cit.

6. *ibid.*, p. 102

To the question why Scotland was making no such demand as Ireland for a separate legislature, the answer presented in this biography was simple. No British Government ventured to override on matters of Scottish local interest the wishes of a majority of the Scottish members of parliament, but ever since the Legislative Union of 1800 the wishes of the overwhelming majority of Irish members on an Irish measure were systematically thwarted. Isaac Butt's effort to have this amended without altering the constitution was fruitless:

Never were courtesy and reason more poorly served. The Irish legislation for which Mr. Butt pressed was neglected by the Government and disdained by the House. Session after session proved barren . . . In the session of 1876 nine Bills dealing with land, education, rating, electoral reform, parliamentary reform, judicial and municipal reform—all burning Irish questions—were introduced by the Irish Party. Few were considered. All except two of minor importance were cast out . . . Mr. Butt introduced a Land Bill of his own—very tame by comparison with subsequent enactments. It was rejected by 290 votes to 56. Nearly thirty measures dealing with the Land Question alone, brought forward by Irish members between 1870 and 1880, perished in the wilderness.”⁷

Such, in Mr. Churchill's graphic picture, was the state of things when those violent measures known as “Obstruction” and those still more violent known as the “Plan of Campaign,” were substituted for the constitutional protests of Isaac Butt. “A new leader,” he then explains, “with new weapons, was at hand.” In the “Little Lodge” of the Phoenix Park, the Lord Lieutenant's son, to his father's horror, was conferring with the men who, says his biographer, might with ease have been deterred by timely concession from having recourse to the desperate methods of the 1880's in Ireland.

It was the Winston Churchill of 1905 who wrote those pages of discerning analysis, as applicable to his own purpose then as to his father's of a generation before. Would he write them now? I doubt it. But he has not retracted them, and there is nothing to show that they do not still express his convictions. Historically they are of the utmost value.

The makings of a “Nationalist” (now so sharply contrasted with an “Imperialist”) are thus discoverable in the Lord Randolph Churchill of 1878 and 1879. One can well understand from his letters of that period how Lord Rosebery thought he was of much the same mind about the Empire as Cobden or

7. *Life*, I, pp. 84, 85.

Bright.⁸ He was constantly cogitating projects of land reform (in the interest of the tenant), economies in expenditure on the armed services that funds might be available for a social welfare scheme, devolution of power to "Local Government Boards" by which the congestion at Westminster might be relieved, or measures of appeasement for the Irish by cooperating with the bishops on university education. He liked the name "Tory democracy" or "Democratic Toryism" for plans such as these, but while their democratic character was plain enough, it was hard to answer Chamberlain's question "Where does the Tory element come in?" The biographer has a suggestive chapter headed "Elijah's Mantle," which might, for the advantage of a public less familiar with the Bible than of old, have had a footnote reference *II Kings, ii*. As the passing of Beaconsfield could not be very far off, not a few wondered whether, like Elisha treasuring Elijah's mantle, Lord Randolph might not be next in the succession. To anyone familiar with Disraeli's *Coningsby* or *Sybil*, the reason for such conjecture would be obvious. He would recall its pictures of the "Altar of Mammon blazing with triple worship" in England after the Reform Act,⁹ of the middle-class money power so much more selfish than feudal caste, of the cash-nexus substituted by Whig economists for *Noblesse Oblige*. How similar were the scornful diatribes of Lord Randolph against the Whigs of the early 1880's, arraigining the Prime Minister as so much more sensitive to the appeal of the atheist Bradlaugh for admission to parliament than to the appeal of Gordon for rescue from the dervishes at Khartoum!¹⁰ Gladstone's "Midlothian Campaign" had been by far the greatest force in rousing British sympathy for the Balkan States under Turkish oppression, but Lord Randolph, while apparently enthusiastic for its purpose, rivalled Disraeli himself in ridicule of its leader.

A like puzzle is revealed by the biographer in his attitude to the Irish policy of the Liberals. Lord Randolph was a zealot for the nationalism of Bulgarians and Bosnians, but would entertain no such project for the Irish. The *Government of Ireland Bill* introduced by Gladstone in 1886, in whose defeat he had so great a share (especially by inciting Ulster Protestants to armed rebellion), proposed only such limited powers for a Dublin parliament as many thought Lord Randolph might, in

8. Rosebery. *Lord Randolph Churchill*.

9. *Sybil*, I, iii.

10. *Life*, I, p. 350.

the very spirit of his conferences with Butt, quite consistently support. But his "democratic Toryism," in which the democratic had previously hidden the Tory element, now reversed those proportions. With no solicitude for the Empire abroad, Lord Randolph was resolute for preserving just that regime of England's dominance in the parliament at Westminster whose neglect of Irish grievances he had so freely admitted and even so eloquently denounced.

How did his biographer, writing of him when he was himself campaigning for a party pledged to Irish Home Rule, feel about this aspect of the record of 1886? In Chapters XII and XIII of the biography there is singular omission of critical comment on it. The party which Mr. Churchill was working so hard to establish in power had prospects of an enormous majority without any help from Irish Nationalist members, and some at least of its most influential leaders—the "Liberal League" trio, Asquith, Haldane, Grey—were known to be anxious for revision of "Gladstonian commitments to the Irish." Moreover, from the first Mr. Churchill shared his father's zeal for the right of Ulster counties to exclusion, if they so desired, from the authority of a Dublin parliament. Throughout half a century he has been to that extent what he still so emphatically proclaims himself, a "partitionist"—hopeful that partition would prove needless or at least temporary, but insistent that the claim of Southern Ireland to "determine itself" one way was no stronger than that of Northern Ireland to determine itself the opposite way.

But to commend Partition is not to commend or even to excuse a plunge into civil war to secure it. Thinking of Mr. Churchill's own record in like circumstances a few years afterwards, the reader must now be startled by his admiring account, written in 1905, of his father's famous oration in Belfast on February 22, 1886; especially of the wild enthusiasm Lord Randolph stirred by his jingle "Ulster will fight, and Ulster will be right," and by his adjustment of Tennyson's lines into

Wave, Ulster, all thy banners wave
And charge with all thy chivalry.

Mr. Churchill's estimate of this, in 1905, was suggestively put in the comment "When men are sufficiently in earnest, they will back their words by more than votes." But ten years later, when the followers of Sir Edward Carson acted in just this spirit, the same observer, then a Minister in the Asquith Government,

had something very different to say. Mr. Churchill having dwelt contemptuously on "all this silly and wicked chatter" about Ulster's purpose of armed resistance, indicated what a Government must regretfully do for discipline, and ended with the ominous summons "There are worse things even than war; let us go forward together and put these grave matters to the proof." He can hardly have been surprised, on his own visit to Belfast in 1912, by having quoted to him what he had written seven years before, and by comparisons with his father which were very much in Lord Randolph's favor.

III

It was on Irish Home Rule that Gladstone's Government of 1886 collapsed, and when the general election gave the Conservatives a lease of power (destined to remain almost unbroken for twenty years) it was natural that, with whatever misgivings, Lord Salisbury should select for high Cabinet office one who had been so efficient an organiser of victory. As Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons, Lord Randolph lasted less than six months. Never, surely, in British political history, was there another such case of meteoric rise followed by almost immediate fall. Mr. Churchill compares the case of Pitt, Prime Minister at the age of twenty-four. But Pitt held power continuously for the next eighteen years. What was the cause of Lord Randolph's rapid and irreparable collapse?

During his short period at the Treasury he was hard at work on his favorite project, that of attaching the British masses to the Conservative Party. But his plans for this, when disclosed to the Cabinet, proved to be such that the Party decided to do without the attachment of the masses rather than secure it—or attempt to secure it—at such a price. His biographer sets out with admirable conciseness and clarity what those plans were. It is difficult, now that in so many respects the principles on which they rested are universally taken as axiomatic, to realize how, sixty-five years ago, they seemed shocking. Again, as in the matter of Irish policy, the question suggests itself—Would the biographer write of such projects now as he wrote in 1905? And again one notes far less difference than the legend about Mr. Churchill's transformation would lead one to expect.

It was on his budget, his first (destined to be also his last) proposals for national finance, that Lord Randolph met his doom. They had an unmistakably Socialist note. Of the

mood in which his colleagues received them he told Lord Welby "They said nothing, nothing at all; but you should have seen their faces." Luxury taxes and taxes on expensive pleasures everywhere increased, that the necessities of the poor might be made cheaper; the motto "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need" applied to income tax and succession duties, to corporation profits, to property in house or land, with a rigor beyond anything of which Tory capitalists had dreamed. The Chancellor was budgetting for a surplus, and showed how this was easily obtainable by a reduction in expenditure on the armed services, which, if accompanied by judicious international diplomacy, would be altogether safe. For the surplus, which he estimated as likely to amount to £12,500,000 (no inconsiderable sum in the financing of those days) he had a scheme of distribution among agencies of county and municipal government—a change in itself distasteful to the traditionalists so devoted to centralized control. Whether the hostility of the Cabinet, and especially of the Prime Minister, when these proposals were understood, arose from solicitude for the national defence equipment which was threatened with reduction or from resentment at such rough handling of "the idle rich", was arguable at the time, but it quickly ceased to be arguable. For the Government, once it had got rid of Lord Randolph, proceeded to adopt his economies on national defence, though it made short work of his scheme for exactions from the rich. The cry about risk of a European war and the urgent need to strengthen the bases for the British fleet disappeared as soon as it had served its party-political purpose. Mr. Churchill sums it up with his usual terse lucidity:

Lord Randolph Churchill procured by his resignation almost every point of detail for which he had struggled in vain in the Cabinet. The reduction of £700,000 in the Navy Estimates, which had been conceded to his insistence, was ratified and maintained by his successor. The Estimates for the Army, which had been declared utterly irreducible, were reduced by £170,000 after his resignation. The Supplementary Estimate of £500,000 for the defences of the Egyptian frontier, to which he had long demurred, was promptly rejected by Mr. Goschen as an unauthorized charge on British funds. The coaling stations, of such vital urgency in December 1886, were left untouched by additional expenditure until 1888.

But while the national treasury had thus the relief which Lord Randolph had intended, it would be long years before his pur-

pose of using money thus saved for the welfare of the poor was even attempted.

IV

What Lord Randolph called "Tory Democracy" or "Democratic Toryism", as contrasted with radical change of the British Constitution, has been the underlying purpose of Mr. Winston Churchill's policy throughout his whole public life. Like his father (and on the principles which Disraeli in Opposition proclaimed but in Office never applied) he would show how progress in social welfare of the British working classes could best be promoted by the long established constitutional machinery, if used in a generous spirit. He summed up, in the conclusion of the biography with which this article deals, the ruling conception both of his own and of his father's mind: "Ancient permanent institutions becoming the instruments of far-reaching social reforms; order conjoined with liberty; stability and yet progress; the Tory party and daring legislation!"¹¹ His breach with the Tory leaders in 1905 (of which the most conspicuous, but by no means the only provocative was the Tory adoption of trade changes which would involve taxing food) resulted in his joining the Liberals, whom he regarded as then more faithful to the cause of progress within the forms of the Constitution, and—by contrast with the Party he had left—ready for the concessions which social justice required from classes long over-privileged. But, like Lord Randolph in his sudden fierce recoil from Irish Nationalists with whom he had been hopefully conferring, when he realized (or thought he realized) that their demands would mean disintegration of the United Kingdom and an outrage on the Protestant North as inexcusable as the outrage on the Catholic South of which they complained, Mr. Churchill, on discovery in 1924 that the official Liberal Party was ready, as he expressed it, "to put the Socialists in power," reacted violently to his original Toryism.

How long it will take his present Tory associates to discover how far he still is from holding many of the doctrines precious to them, remains to be seen. At least he is secure from any such rough handling as befell Lord Randolph. But the interest of this article is not in political forecasting; it is in the question whether Mr. Churchill can claim, amid superficial changes, to have kept and promoted the same essential purpose throughout his public life. To that question, with allowance for minor and

11. *Life*, II. p. 487.

temporary shiftings, it answers emphatically that this claim for him can be made good.

From which of his former fundamental principles can his accusers prove him apostate? In his own famous essay entitled "Consistency in Politics"¹² he argued that party change may be a vital condition of loyalty to principles, because parties at least as conspicuously as individuals have compromised principle for power. It is an argument which he has not only presented but illustrated in his own career. Noting that his second party change is denounced by the very critics who welcomed his first and *vice versa*, one may fairly suspect that the complaint in each case was not of his changing but of the direction in which he changed. What great issues have his accusers in mind? Free Trade? Government of Ireland? Imperial Integration? Social Welfare Measures? Powers of the House of Lords? Think of these in turn. The personal convictions avowed in his *Life of Lord Randolph*, issued at the very moment of his secession to the Liberal Party, were not, on the topics here named, essentially different from those which he now, as Leader of the Tories, proclaims.

We may leave Free Trade out of the reckoning, because the First World War and its sequel rendered Free Trade (in the 1905 sense) impossible, and—as Macaulay once said—a man is no more to be called a revolutionary because he participates in universal revolution than he is to be called an Oriental traveler because he rotates from West to East with the Earth and all things thereon. On Government of Ireland, by his share in the "Midnight Treaty" of 1922 (partitioning the country) Mr. Churchill offended alike the intransigents of Unionism who would yield not a jot to Irish national aspiration and the intransigents of Sinn Fein bent on nothing less than a sovereign Irish Republic. His opinions on that issue, so far as he explains them, are still as they were in 1905, though the extremists who were most menacing forty-six years ago are not the extremists most dangerous now, and in consequence, while he is saying the same thing now that he said then, the edge of his declamation is now keenest for those who then felt it least. On powers of the House of Lords, as on Free Trade, what was forty years ago arguable is arguable no longer, nor is there anything to show that as Leader of the Tories Mr. Churchill would propose to restore the veto of an unrepresentative Second Chamber which, as a Liberal in 1912 he did so much to abolish. To those who

12. Included in the volume *Thoughts and Adenures*.

reproach him for resisting Social Welfare reforms, he has himself somewhat aptly replied that he was author of the first Unemployment Insurance Act ever passed by the British parliament, and to any reader of his biography of his father it is obvious that he was prepared in 1905 as he still is for sweeping social changes, but always within the fabric of a united British Commonwealth. In essence his argument now for "Free Enterprise" against "Socialism" is his argument of half a century ago for Free Trade.

It is not the thesis of this article that no contradictions are discoverable in the sequence of Mr. Churchill's programs at different times. Cast-iron consistency such as that, in times such as the half-century of his career in parliament, would be ridiculous if it were not impossible. But while adjustments to circumstance abound in the record of that great public life, changes made inevitably by an altogether new situation, it had a unity far deeper than its differences, and it has been the concern of the present article to show from his biography of his father how baseless as well as ungenerous are the charges of "lack of principle" against one to whom his country owes so much.