

CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS 1848–1876

Arthur James Balfour was born at Whittingehame in East Lothian, the farming centre of Scotland, on 25 July 1848. His grandfather and father were wealthy and well-connected members of the Scottish gentry. His mother and paternal grandmother were both daughters of aristocrats. By the fortune of birth, Balfour belonged to the large landowning oligarchy which had virtually monopolized power in Britain until the Reform Act of 1832 and which continued to enjoy, thereafter in alliance with the plutocratic bourgeoisie, political, economic and social pre-eminence until the First World War.

The Balfours traced their ancestry back to a Saxon or Danish immigrant from Northumbria who settled in the Scottish Lowlands in the eleventh century. Another supposed ancestor was Robert Bruce,¹ who won the throne of Scotland and successfully held it against the Plantagenets. The Balfour clan prospered and eventually took root in different parts of the country. In the seventeenth century, one of Arthur's forebears, George Balfour, bought the estate of Balbirnie in Fifeshire and established the Balbirnie branch of the Balfour family.

Another branch of the family was founded by Arthur's grandfather, James Balfour (1773–1845). The second son of a laird of Balbirnie, he made a fortune of about £300,000 in India as a contractor for the British navy. After his return home, he purchased the 10,000-acre Whittingehame estate near Haddington, about 20 miles east of Edinburgh, which provided a net rental income of more than £11,000 yearly. 'The Nabob' (so he was customarily referred to by his descendants) also purchased several other properties, including a town house in London, the estate of Balgonie in Fife, and a large shooting-lodge known as Strathconan in the Highlands. A substantial figure in the East Lothian district, he became a justice of the peace and deputy lord-lieutenant and

¹ Blanche E. C. Dugdale, *Arthur James Balfour* (New York, 1937), vol. 1, p. 1.

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Sydney H. Zebel
Excerpt
[More information](#)

BALFOUR

was elected in 1831 as a Tory member of Parliament, holding his seat until 1835.

James Balfour married Lady Eleanor Maitland, a daughter of the Earl of Lauderdale, in 1815. The couple, despite the tragic loss of an infant in a fire, were able to do well for themselves and their other four children. In the 1820s they engaged Robert Smirke, the architect of the British Museum, to build a large classical Greek mansion at Whittingehame; when completed, they furnished it with smart French furniture, Sèvres china, and the other appurtenances of an aristocratic household. Their first-born son, James Maitland (1820–56), Arthur's father, was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, as befitted the heir of the Whittingehame Balfours. The second son, Charles, was provided with the Balgonie estate in Fife. One of the daughters married Lord Augustus Fitzroy, later seventh Duke of Grafton.

James Maitland Balfour inherited the canny business sense and political interests of his father. He became a director of the North British Railway at the height of the great railway boom and quickly made a large fortune. He also served, although briefly and inconspicuously, as a Conservative member of Parliament in the 1840s. Like his father, he too contracted a fortunate marriage: in 1843 the young Scottish M.P. married Lady Blanche Gascoigne Cecil, a daughter of the second Marquess of Salisbury and sister of Lord Robert Cecil, afterwards third Marquess of Salisbury and Prime Minister, and a member of one of England's most prominent and influential families since the sixteenth century.

Like many other mid-Victorians, including the royal couple, the Maitland Balfours dismissed Malthusian theories as irrelevant to their existence. Lady Blanche gave birth to nine children during the next eleven years. The first three were girls – Eleanor, Evelyn, and a third who died at birth; the next two were boys – Arthur James and Cecil; then another girl – Alice – followed; and the last three were all boys – Francis, Gerald, and Eustace. The first son was named Arthur, after the famous 'Iron Duke' of Wellington, a close friend of the Salisbury family,¹ and James, after his father and grandfather.

¹ Sir Herbert Maxwell, *The Life of Wellington* (2nd ed.; London, 1900), vol. 2, pp. 375–6.

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Sydney H. Zebel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

EARLY YEARS

In 1854, a few months before the birth of his youngest son, James Maitland Balfour was stricken with tuberculosis – a not uncommon disease at that time in Scotland. Despite the best medical attention then available, he died two years later. Lady Blanche, although still a comparatively young woman of thirty-one, never remarried and devoted her life almost completely to the rearing of her children. The financial affairs of the estate were supervised by Lord Robert Cecil and Charles Balfour, who acted as joint trustees during their nephew Arthur's minority.¹

Lady Blanche nursed her brood through the usual childhood illnesses, carefully supervised their early education, and also provided for their religious instruction. A strict Evangelical, she brought up her children as members of both the Anglican Church of England and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. 'Teach me,' she pleaded in a prayer she composed in 1851, 'my duties to superiors, equals and inferiors. . . Teach me to use my influence over each and all, especially children and servants, aright. . . and especially that I may guide with the love and wisdom which are far above the religious education of my children.'² Her remarkable sense of duty became apparent during the 'cotton famine' in Lancashire at the time of the American Civil War. She discharged several servants, contributing their wages to the famine fund, and offered work in her household to two unemployed mill-girls. As a lesson in empathy, rather than because of financial stringency, the Balfour children were required to help with the cooking and other chores. Arthur on occasion made beds and polished boots.³

The children profited – although unequally – from their mother's rather rigorous training. Arthur was to achieve fame as a national political figure and author of books on philosophy. Gerald became a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and University Lecturer in Greek; later he also entered politics, sat in Parliament for twenty years, and held posts in three Cabinets. Francis, rated by Arthur as the most brilliant member of the

¹ Kenneth Young, *Arthur James Balfour* (London, 1963), p. 25.

² Margot Asquith, *An Autobiography* (New York, 1920), vol. 1, p. 263.

³ Lord Rayleigh, *Lord Balfour in His Relation to Science* (Cambridge, 1930), p. 7.

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Sydney H. Zebel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BALFOUR

family, won early recognition as an authority on genetics and at age twenty-nine was appointed to the newly-created chair of Animal Morphology at Cambridge. The older daughters – Eleanor and Evelyn – became wives of eminent Cambridge academicians; and the youngest son, Eustace, became a prominent and successful architect and served for many years as Colonel-in-Chief of the London and Scottish Volunteer Regiment. But not all of the children adjusted well to life's circumstances. Cecil, the black sheep of the family, contracted gambling debts, forged Arthur's name to a cheque, and went off to Australia, where he met with an accidental death. Alice, although a gifted woman with varied intellectual interests, was extraordinarily sensitive about her 'extreme plainness'. Like her brother Arthur, she never married and acted for many years as his hostess at Whittingehame and London.¹

When questioned on one occasion about his childhood, Arthur Balfour said all he could remember was 'having very tired legs after walking'.² But in his uncompleted *Chapters of Autobiography*, written when he was nearly eighty, he devoted considerable space to the early period of his life.³ Although he was past seven when his father died in February 1856, he stated that he did not remember the event and could not 'in the least recollect his personality'. Nor could he recall in any detail his visits in 1854–5 and 1855–6 to Madeira where the family went to winter for the sake of his ailing father's health. 'My memory supplies nothing resembling a continuous picture of my life before the latter part of 1856,' he wrote. Then he remembered 'witnessing from... the cardroom of the Turf Club, the display of fireworks celebrating the conclusion of the Crimean War...'. His love for his mother was evident: 'Our debt to her,' he wrote, 'is incalculable; and it is largely through the working of her spirit that the close-knit continuity of our family life remained unbroken by her death, and has remained so to the time of her great-grandchildren.' Also evident was his affection for Whittingehame ('where I was born, where I hope to

¹ This information about Balfour's family, which was kindly furnished by the present Earl of Balfour, differs in detail from that presented in Young, *Balfour*, pp. 10–11.

² Lady Cynthia Asquith, *Haply I Remember* (London, 1950), p. 1.

³ Arthur James Balfour, *Chapters of Autobiography* (London, 1930), pp. 1–24.

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Sydney H. Zebel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

EARLY YEARS

be buried, which has been my home through life.') and for Hatfield, the great Salisbury house in Hertfordshire, which he visited frequently during his childhood and where he enjoyed the companionship of his grandfather's young children by his second marriage to Lady Mary Sackville-West.

Two months before his eleventh birthday, Arthur was sent away to the Grange, a private boarding school at Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire. 'The transfer of educational responsibility from private tutors... though accompanied by all the pains of family separation,' Balfour later recalled, 'was otherwise an unmixed blessing.' The school was a small one and the headmaster, the Reverend C. G. Chittenden, a kindly person who was interested in poetry, philosophy, music, and science. He also had a special interest in the Cecil family, being related by marriage to Lady Blanche's female companion and to a former rector of Hatfield. 'The greatest merit of all from my point of view,' wrote Balfour, 'he was very ready to answer questions about things in general, asked by an inquisitive and doubtless rather tiresome pupil.' Balfour acknowledged that his debt to him was 'greater certainly than any I owe to other teachers of my boyhood'.¹

Years later, the Reverend Chittenden wrote an informative description of his famous pupil. He portrayed young Balfour as 'a peculiarly attractive boy, with a look of bright intelligence when he was well; but his health was far from strong' and he suffered from a 'lack of vital energy'. On the advice of a doctor (who probably feared an inherited predisposition to lung trouble), the boy would frequently rest or nap in the afternoon 'when he felt languid'. Arthur even as a child enjoyed music; although unwilling then to exert the effort required to master an instrument himself, he 'liked to have the organ softly played in the hall below'. (Some years later, he learned to play the concertina and piano and became an accomplished performer on both.)

Even after he began to grow stronger, Arthur cared little for exercise or athletic games. Chittenden noted that 'He would *endure* a game of cricket conscientiously, as he would anything

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

BALFOUR

that was prescribed by lawful authority.’ His preference was for walks with the headmaster, who described him as ‘a delightful companion’ and his conversation as ‘much more like that of an intelligent youth of eighteen than that of a boy of twelve’. But the youngster showed little real diligence in his studies, Chittenden admitted, and his account book showed frequent entries of half-penny fines for ‘Lateness’.¹

In September 1861, when he was thirteen, Arthur entered Eton, where he was to remain for the next five years. He read a great deal, if somewhat haphazardly, and claimed that he had ‘no difficulty in maintaining an average position among my contemporaries’. Modern literature, modern history, and natural science were his major interests. But his career at Eton was admittedly undistinguished. Balfour later ascribed his mediocrity in scholarship and sports to his delicate health and myopic vision. ‘Under doctor’s orders I was excused early school; I was not sufficiently robust to excel at football, too shortsighted to enjoy cricket; and in those far-off days a boy, though he might be shortsighted, was not expected to wear spectacles.’ But Balfour made no effort to place all the blame for his academic shortcomings on his physical disabilities. ‘The fact is, that I had no gift for languages, no liking for grammar, and never acquired sufficient mastery of the classics to enjoy them as literature.’ Undoubtedly the large classes, which he complained of, also made it difficult for a shy and sensitive teenager to appear to advantage; and the ‘communal life of Eton’ which he later praised as ‘in itself an education’,² seems to have had for him only limited value. Although he fagged for a time for Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, later Marquess of Lansdowne, who subsequently became a friend and close political colleague, he apparently did not know either Lord Randolph Churchill or Lord Dalmeny (afterwards Lord Rosebery), who were also at Eton in the mid 1860s.³

In his autobiography, Balfour recalled two incidents of his years at Eton as particularly memorable. The first of these was his successful performance in a written competition ‘relating to

¹ Dugdale, *Balfour*, vol. 1, pp. 7–8.

² Balfour, *Autobiography*, p. 8.

³ Young, *Balfour*, p. 14.

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Sydney H. Zebel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

EARLY YEARS

matters outside our ordinary school curriculum'. He could not remember later whether it was an essay or the answer to 'miscellaneous questions'. It was only the second prize which was awarded him, but the master informed him that his entry would certainly have been rated first 'if the poor quality of my other papers had not rendered such an honour impossible'. The second episode recalled by Balfour was a conversation with his 'Uncle Robert', the later Marquess of Salisbury, who as heir to the peerage after his older brother's death was now styled Lord Cranborne. Cranborne was already a rising figure in Conservative politics and was shortly to take office as a member of the new Derby-Disraeli Cabinet. With characteristic forgetfulness, Balfour was unable to remember any details of the conversation but was so impressed by his uncle's frank man-to-man talk and 'the impression of conversational equality' that he recorded it as marking 'a fresh departure'. Cranborne was then about thirty-six years old, as Balfour noted, and he himself would have just turned eighteen.

In late 1866, a few months after this conversation took place, Balfour matriculated for the Michaelmas term at Cambridge. He entered, like his father a generation earlier, as a Fellow-Commoner of Trinity. A Fellow-Commoner paid higher fees than other students but was entitled to wear a blue-and-silver gown, to have rooms within the college precincts, and, most important of all, to dine in Hall with the dons at High Table. This privileged status was to be abolished a few years later but Balfour, although characterizing it in his biography as a 'strange relic of a bygone age', found it personally 'of incalculable advantage'. The opportunities for informal discourse at meal-time enabled him to form enduring friendships with a number of the senior scholars. One such friend was F. W. H. Myers, a poet and essayist and also a founder of the Society for Psychical Research (who aroused Balfour's own lasting interest in psychic phenomena). Another was Henry Sidgwick, who in 1875 was appointed Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge. Still another was John Strutt, later third Lord Rayleigh, who became a world-famous scientist, Nobel Prize winner, and Chancellor of Cambridge. Both

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Sydney H. Zebel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BALFOUR

Sidgwick and Strutt also subsequently became brothers-in-law of Balfour, Strutt marrying his sister Evelyn in 1871 and Sidgwick his sister Eleanor five years later.

It was under Sidgwick's direction that Balfour read for the recently-introduced Moral Sciences Tripos, which included philosophy and political economy. The choice was largely dictated by his indifference to either classics or mathematics, the traditional Cambridge honours studies. Since the young Scotsman had a fine mind, as was later evident, and was genuinely interested in philosophic issues, he might have been expected to excel as a student. However, because of lack of industry and system – shortcomings he himself acknowledged – he achieved a disappointing second class in the Tripos examination which he took in November 1869. Still another possible explanation for his lacklustre performance was an external influence which receives no mention in his autobiography. Balfour apparently seriously contemplated staying on permanently at Cambridge as a Fellow, with the expectation of achieving in due course a professorship. But his mother, in a fine display of scorn for professional scholarship, warned him to reconsider: 'Do it and you will have nothing to write about after you are forty.'¹ Even so, he never relinquished his interest in the study of philosophy, and eventually published four books and a half dozen essays in that field, the majority of them when past forty.

One of Balfour's Cambridge contemporaries described how he and other friends used to meet in the young would-be philosopher's rooms to 'discuss in moderation his excellent claret, with much talk of men and books'. Balfour was an excellent conversationalist and apparently had much worth saying about all sorts of topics. But he gave little evidence at this time, according to this reporter, of his future interest in public issues. 'On the contrary, as I remember him then, there was an unusual disregard, and almost contempt for current politics; he was emphatically not one of the show young men who come from the [Cambridge] Union or the Canning [Club] and take their place as it were by right in the House of Commons.'² Balfour later claimed that he had

¹ Young, *Balfour*, p. 10.

² Dugdale, *Balfour*, vol. 1, p. 12.

Cambridge University Press

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Sydney H. Zebel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

EARLY YEARS

belonged to the Union, but he undoubtedly played an inactive role, never taking part in the members' debates.

College life permitted time not only for study and talk but also for sports and other recreation. By this time, Balfour had outgrown his childhood physical weaknesses, his near-sightedness had been corrected by spectacles, and he showed interest in several different types of athletics. Shortly before he left Eton, he had been introduced to tennis by an expert teacher of the game and 'at once fell victim to its fascination'. He spent many hours on the courts at Cambridge 'in the first rapture of this honeymoon' (and was still enviously described as 'a keen player' by an aging contemporary almost sixty years later).¹

Boating was another sport which he enjoyed at this time. During the long recess of 1867, he and two fellow-undergraduates paddled and sailed in single-masted kayak-type canoes along the rocky Scottish coast and even ventured forth 16 miles into the open ocean to visit the small island of Rum. The trip was quite uneventful, but it might easily have ended in disaster. Balfour himself later described the episode as 'a very hair-brained [sic] adventure', and his autobiography makes no mention of any subsequent escapade of that sort. Golf, eventually his favourite sport, was not then popular outside of Scotland; he had opportunity to play it only occasionally, when he returned home during vacations.

Balfour was also able to indulge his old fondness for music during his years at the university. 'At home,' he recalled, 'my opportunities of hearing good music were small, and of hearing it in the society of those who not only cared for it but knew something about it, almost negligible.' At Cambridge, however, ample opportunity existed to listen to excellent organists and choirs and to attend chamber-music concerts of his favourite classical composers. Through a mutual interest in music, he formed a close friendship with Spencer Lyttelton, a fine amateur singer and athlete who (like his seven brothers) was notable for prowess at cricket. Balfour and Lyttelton spent several Easter vacations travelling together on the continent and a few years

¹ Roy Jenkins, *Asquith: Portrait of a Man and an Era* (New York, 1966), p. 518.

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Sydney H. Zebel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BALFOUR

later were able to make a world tour together. ‘But of even more importance than seeing something of the world,’ Balfour later reminisced, ‘were the friendships which through him, I formed with his family and their cousins the Gladstones.’ Spencer’s mother, the late Lady Lyttelton, and the Liberal Prime Minister’s wife Catherine were sisters.

In July 1869, a few months before taking his Tripos examination, Balfour came of legal age and acquired control of a £4,000,000 fortune, invested in landed property and other types of equities.¹ Undoubtedly he was one of the richest men at that time in Britain. After taking his degree, he left Cambridge to pursue the career of a gentleman of leisure. He remodelled the family home at Whittingehame, spent money on improvement of the estate, and in 1871 bought a town house at No. 4, Carlton Gardens, in the fashionable Pall Mall district of London, which he was to retain for the rest of his life. He commissioned the artist Sir Edward Burne-Jones to paint a series of murals for the large drawing room and also purchased several of Burne-Jones’s canvases. He was financial sponsor in 1873 of a performance of an obscure oratorio by Handel, his favourite composer, at the Albert Hall.²

In his autobiography, Balfour wrote reticently about his personal activities during the years immediately after he attained his majority:

I saw something of London society; I heard a great deal of music; I played (court) tennis at Lord’s with much enjoyment and some improvement; I invited friends to Whittingehame; I visited them in country houses; I travelled; in short, I did the sort of thing that other young men do whose energies are not absorbed in learning or practising their chosen profession.

Mary Gladstone, a young daughter of the Liberal Prime Minister, recorded some more interesting details about him (and herself) in her diary.³ The first pertinent entry tells of a ball she attended at Oxford in June 1870, where ‘I danced 3 times with King Arthur.’ The royal title suggests the strongly favourable

¹ Young, *Balfour*, p. xiii.

² Balfour, *Autobiography*, p. 233.

³ Lucy Masterman (ed.), *Mary Gladstone (Mrs Drew), Her Diaries and Letters* (London, 1930), *passim*.