INTRODUCTION

Situations vacant

How extensive is a statesman's situation? How long is a piece of string? So much depends on the questions one wants to ask and the angle from which the person is viewed. Seen in one way, the only situation of Lord Salisbury worth the name would take the form of a vast comparative study of modern European aristocracies and their relation to the defining conditions of modernity – economic crisis, the revolution in the social status of particular groups, the coming of various forms of 'democracy' – so that the British variant could be accorded due weight and its deviations identified. The story would concern itself with land and its declining ability to control the *ancien régime*.[1] It would talk about the 'power' of people such as the Marquis of Salisbury or the Earl of Derby to determine the course of politics or retard the onset of 'the people' in comparison with the continuing clout of a Polish noble or a Prussian Junker. It would seek a convertible currency, a sort of argumentative euro, in which the achievements and derelictions of the British case might be assessed. We can always discuss an historical phenomenon as though it had little life of its own, apart from reacting to circumstance, outside some assumed 'process' that is held to drive modernity forwards and account for its transformations. No one doubts that in 1860 conservative landed aristocracies looked more secure than they appeared in 1900 – more confident of their future, more dug in. So one way of situating Salisbury and his circle is to make them look like symbols of this transition toward crisis: a rearguard of privilege concerned to lose ground, where it had to lose it at all, only inch by inch. Complications and singularities disappear in an easier

[1] The seminal account of the relationship is Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (1981). Cf. Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford, 1989) and Dominic Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815–1914* (Basingstoke, 1992).

narrative about the triumph of the masses discovered among a shared experience of progress from Brest to Minsk.

Or one could insert a different filter and train a long-distance lens on Britain from the vantage point of Capitol Hill, producing a negative photograph of American enlightenment and promise. Here, with the Civil War and Lincoln's death at one's back, glad amid the prospect of ever-increasing prosperity and social inclusiveness described in Reconstruction rhetoric, Gladstone's liberal utopia (crafted in the wake of the North's victory) becomes Britain's true and authentic future, one perversely arrested for a time by the arrival of Conservative reaction in the figures of Disraeli and Salisbury. They preside over a period of timid reaction, certainly; but it should be seen as one sandwiched between the healthy progressivism of the People's William, as Gladstone had become known and adored, and the inevitable return to sanity in 1906 when the overwhelming voice of the nation returned Britain to her proper track. The curve of this narrative differs sharply from the story of aristocratic decline informed by a European comparator but it has the same grandeur and same appeal to large structures implicit in the transition to twentieth-century mass politics. Its *dénouement* comes as no more of a surprise than did the other's. Late-Victorian Conservatism dies of suffocation, smothered by enveloping forces far greater than itself, a prisoner of structural constraint that no man can see and none escape. There is nothing wrong with such a view, apart from its intrinsic lack of imagination, but we can reasonably feel uncomfortable when an historical formation turns into passive victim. It is hard to shake off the feeling that agency – the doings of identifiable people in specific situations – helped shape the outcome and that situations may be small and definable as well as huge and ineffable.

But which people? One way of situating political leaders is to locate them among their followers on the ground that leaders do not make parties; the heart of a political formation is seen rather in its popular base and its organisational cadre. This thought leads towards historical sociology and psephology as the best way to explain political events. An account emerges in which we are supposed to understand what was happening by moving away from leadership and concentrating on party machines, constituency politics, grass-roots and the success in elections that is supposed to turn on such things. Two aspects of this situational approach seem

striking. First, it views political change as a process whose structural features can be identified and explained – a conclusion that this book will resist, partly out of a disbelief in 'processes', partly because it would like to move beyond 'structures', partly because it just begins somewhere else. Salisbury saw himself as the captain of a ship with a rudder but no destination and keeping afloat as the essence of his problem.[2] We shall follow his mental processes rather than give them a coherence that eluded him. Second (and more damaging), the proponents of history-from-below present the elements they identify as somehow more 'real' or 'fundamental' than the actions and perceptions of those at the top of the system, rejecting in Salisbury's case 'the jaundiced anti-democratic musings of Conservative grandees'[3] in favour, presumably, of the jaundiced pro-democratic musings of Conservative nobodies. It has its place. It frequently does not know its place. The result is a persistent prejudice that historians who write about major political personalities and their thought-world suffer from some sort of simple-mindedness or theoretical *naïveté*. This book focusses on people at the top because that is what Salisbury did and the project here lies in constructing his sense of location. It will not follow Salisbury's injunction to his party managers to study 'villa Toryism' because in speaking of demotic politics he quite literally did not know what he was talking about, having spent very little time in villas apart from the holiday chalets, as he preferred to call them, that he happened to own. We shall take an interest instead in what he did know about: the smaller situation that encompassed himself and his chosen circle.

Small situations arrest the attention of biographers. In Salisbury's case the result is a narrative line along which life-changing thresholds appear: birth in 1830, education at Eton and at home, Oxford, his world tour, parliament, his peerage, India Office (twice), then Foreign Office, the premiership (four times from 1885), his retirement and death in 1902–3. The story widens out at a number of points, like a snake swallowing a victim whole, and becomes what Sir Geoffrey Elton used to call a 'thickened narrative' in which the author glances sideways to fill in context and explain what is taking

[2] 'The barque looks crazier & crazier – & the chances of her floating diminish day by day': Salisbury to Balfour, 18 Dec. 1886, Balfour MSS SRO GD433/2/29.

[3] Jon Lawrence and Jane Elliott, 'Parliamentary Election Results Reconsidered: An Analysis of Borough Elections, 1885–1910', in E. H. H. Green (ed.), *An Age of Transition: British Politics, 1880–1914* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 28. I confess a violent aversion to all 'ages of transition'.

place.[4] It is a crucial task and Salisbury's historical profile has recently undergone significant revision in biographical accounts that have fed on the great archive at Hatfield House.[5] But not every life slides into the mode of biography: there are people whose knees and elbows always protrude. Sometimes their lives seem to resemble a battle against continuity, as that of Joseph Chamberlain so often does in retrospect. Some of them, like Gladstone, live for so long and occupy so many spaces that no single narrative will come close to coping with their complexities. In Salisbury's case the problem does not lie in theological sophistication or philosophical depth so much as in a disposition that resisted the categories most familiar to his students. Religion was central but he would never talk about it. His journalism has been made central but he would never discuss it. His thinking was impressive but he chose to make it sound like common sense. His politics followed rather than led. About Lord Randolph Churchill we can write a 'political life'.[6] For Salisbury this procedure does not work because his life was political in a more distanced and nuanced sense that often took its form from quite different environments. In his case we never crawl out from beneath Carlyle's sisyphian predicament: the brilliant insight that narrative is *linear* but action is *solid*.[7]

The Victorians had a way of dealing with this perpetual problem. They liked to compose a lengthy 'Life and Times' of their heroes in which they made some pretence, often not much more than that, at thinking laterally and examining the broader situation within which their subject ought to be located by posterity. Normally their text would assume the pose of a Time seen through the Life in question. And in a way that is what *Lord Salisbury's World* seeks to do: it wants to put the Times back into Salisbury's Life. Perhaps it goes further, though, in implying that the Life can be examined through the Time as much as vice versa. Perhaps man and context enjoy a mutual conditioning which biography (a mode that always boasts about the distinctiveness of its chosen figure) often misses and which analytical

[4] Cf. Elton on narrative and analysis in G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (1969), pp. 160–76.
[5] David Steele treats centrally the problems of policy in his *Lord Salisbury: A Political Biography* (1999), while the new official life, Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (1999) provides a more flamboyant though less sure-footed account. Both of these studies appeared after the completion of the draft of the present account in August 1999.
[6] R. F. Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill: A Political Life* (Oxford, 1981).
[7] Carlyle, 'On History' (1830), quoted in John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Oxford, 1985), p. 44.

monographs can also stamp out through their fascination with the structures and forces that they consider. My own way of thinking about this crux will not be to everyone's taste. We are so accustomed to drawing mental time-lines as we read along that biography feels a more fluent enterprise than a collection of loops and circles of the kind awaiting the reader of this book. Rather than begin with the birth of Lord Robert Cecil and end with the death of the third Marquis of Salisbury, we step sideways and look askance at the whole trajectory, now from one direction, now from another, thinking as we go about Salisbury's relationship to a particular environment and blatantly ignoring some other aspects that a biographer might deem *de rigueur*. Combining these perceptions will leave us speaking French (*mentalité*) or German (*Weltanschauung*) or at least American ('mind-set'). It comes with the territory.

Situating anybody demands a location in space and time, so we start from there. Where to go after that depends on my judgements about Lord Salisbury's temperament and preoccupations but also about the broader context of his age: the elements that he manipulated and the ties that bound his hands. It should be said at once that the choice of environments has its arbitrary side. One could reasonably complain that this book is not about Salisbury's foreign and domestic policies and that these best show his environment. But that world has received so much attention from his biographers and the authors of specialist studies that it seemed to offer a tired and possibly rather dated way of arranging the argument. It could be said that Salisbury's central context lies in the economic depression of the 1870s and 1880s that changed everybody's context. There is much in this view and a strong argument exists for placing political economy and the collectivist drive that often followed from it at the core of this work. But this feature of late-Victorian Conservatism has already been impressively assessed by Dr Euan Green and others,[8] and although we shall tumble into the great depression repeatedly here, it will not be elevated to special consideration in its more strictly economic aspects. It will be said, equally, that Salisbury was a Conservative politician and that this book reaches the Conservative party only in chapter 9. That is deliberate. Too much time has been spent in making Salisbury sound like a premature version of Neville

[8] E. H. H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880–1914* (1995). Cf. Matthew Fforde, *Conservatism and Collectivism, 1886–1914* (Edinburgh, 1990).

Chamberlain or Harold Macmillan, compelled and impelled by party. Instead, I have chosen domains about which something fresh may be said and which fall within my own sphere of competence. My cue comes partly from Salisbury himself. I have responded to areas of discussion that preoccupied him and those which pressed on him whether he were preoccupied by them or not.

Marx came close to the heart of things when he taught that men make their own history but not in circumstances of their own choosing. He would have missed the significance of Salisbury, none the less, in forgetting that some individuals are clever and powerful enough to make some of their own circumstances. We shall hear throughout this book a conversation between context and control, structure and agency, but the weight accorded to Salisbury's opinions and actions within the environments reviewed here argues against treating him as simply another voice among his colleagues and correspondents. In Victorian Britain some people were more equal than others. For much of the time, therefore, Salisbury holds the centre of the stage, but the subject of the book is the stage itself and the distinctive set on which other actors have walk-on roles or supporting parts. I shall fail to suppress my admiration for Salisbury: I find him bitingly intelligent, focussed and funny. If the book has to have a hero, on the other hand, then it must be the man in a thorn-proof suit at the back of the stage, stroking his setters and fluffing every line. The sixth Duke of Richmond lacked almost every skill known to the world of politics and thought. He brought to his life-long service of country, party and church only a bewildered resolve, his amicability, generosity and code of personal honour. He will leave modern Conservatives pained by a sense of contrast and loss. He thought Salisbury too clever by half, thought the country going to the dogs, saw no point in foreigners, saw murderers and crooks where others saw socialists and radicals. Yet he never abandoned his faith that all could be smoothed over among men of goodwill by human kindness or, in serious cases of misunderstanding, by a haunch of venison and a kippered salmon.

Richmond, Cairns, Carnarvon, Churchill, Derby, on the one side, the Queen, the bishops, the maharajas and Gladstone on the other lent Salisbury's situation a richness of personal contact and friction. He himself was a thinker who located his opinions in the world and not in treatises such as those of his nephew, Arthur James Balfour. It will be important to go to his own medium and inspect his own

language. It is not compulsory, on the other hand, to take him at his word. We can make our own historical environment from his letters and the diaries and memories of his circle, evoking a world that none of its participants knew except in glimpses but which we, privileged by distance and years, can construct in our very different situation. Fabrications of this kind give us a Salisbury both larger and smaller than may seem familiar. Larger, because his genius in inventing the world that he wished to govern strikes us constantly from the material that he bequeathed for historical study. Smaller, because life's contingencies spare no one and each of us loses a battle against the ungovernable. The tension between the two makes Salisbury at once a master of the late-Victorian moment and yet its ultimate victim – a man of his time.

CHAPTER I

Time

FAMILY TIME

For the Cecils – or 'Sissels', as they pronounced themselves until quite recently – the historical clock ticks evenly but slowly. They have maintained a presence in British history, sometimes national in their importance, sometimes provincial, since their rise to grandeur through the political careers of Elizabeth I's minister, William Cecil, Lord Burghley (1520–98) and his son Robert, first Earl of Salisbury (1563–1612). The twin genealogies descending from William Cecil's two marriages, one of them issuing in earls and marquises of Salisbury, the other in earls and marquises of Exeter, come down to the present and reflect chronologies no less different than the competing clusters that make up the two wings of the family. Rarely have Exeters captured headlines; the tempo of their existence in the great house at Burghley, near Stamford, has a certain regularity of pulse with a quickening in the late seventeeth century when the so-called Little Bedlam Club brought some society and a certain drunken panache to the house. The Salisburys took a different curve: powerful in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, quiescent during the eighteenth century, rising to major prominence in the subject of this book, Robert, the third Marquis, and then continuing their serious political and social importance until half way through the twentieth century. In our own century, the Exeters of Burghley have become ghosts wandering the corridors of their property on the occasions when they visit from Canada. The Cecils of Hatfield House still live there and maintain a social cachet reflected in London Clubs (anathema to the third Marquis) and Lord Cranborne's Conservative leadership of the House of Lords until the spaniel in him brought it to a spectacular end at the hands of Mr William Hague. This distended sense of time within one of the

most prominent families that England has ever produced helps explain some of the attitudes and approaches sometimes found among its members. It says something pertinent about how Cecils understood themselves in the century after the death of Robert Peel and throws shafts of light across the life of one of them – the most significant since the Tudors – who died in the middle of that recasting of family fortunes. It explains, too, why the story cannot begin with his birth.

Important elements in giving our Salisbury a sense of historical location began, paradoxically, with the second Marquis (1791–1868). 'Paradoxically' not only because Salisbury detested his father for much of the latter's life but because James Gascoyne-Cecil, second Marquis of Salisbury, proved one of the less significant Cecils of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Short, vigorous and aggressive, he led the life of a soldier *manqué* with a passion for the county militia, which need not detain us, for estate management at Hatfield House, which became significant when part of it burned down in 1835, and for procreation whose results would prove formidable, not least in making two women and many brothers and sisters central to his famous son's development and providing a context stretching from the first born, the ill-fated James, in 1821, to Arthur, one of the sons to his second wife, who did not die until 1913. The twelve children of the second Marquis divided seven and five: the first batch to Frances Gascoyne and the second to Lady Mary Sackville-West. Both of them stimulate resonances at the end of the twentieth century, one accurate, one not. Frances was the daughter of Sir Bamber Gascoyne whose name indeed lives on in a famous television personality; Lady Mary belonged, on the other hand, to those Sackvilles who were once dukes of Dorset into whom the fifth Earl of De La Warr had married, rather than to the gardening and poetry associated with Vita of Knole and Harold Nicolson. Both of them were to exercise a serious influence on the young and not-so-young Salisbury because one became his mother and the other the lover and wife of a fellow cabinet minister, the fifteenth Earl of Derby, with whom Salisbury would fight his great battles over Near Eastern policy in the 1870s. What the second Marquis inadvertently achieved (and he expired before the consequences became clear) was the union of the houses of Hatfield and Knowsley and the drawing into common threads of a narrative surrounding two great landed families. Like a spider dead in its own web, he left little of himself

beyond his sticky extrusions which would envelop all the children and those who came after.

The young Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil, born in 1830, kept out of his father's way. Lady Gwendolen Cecil, Salisbury's daughter and biographer, would later reflect, in a miracle of understatement, that the second Marquis generated an atmosphere 'not wholly peaceable';[1] so Robert preferred to become a Gascoyne, close to his mother, though he must in very early years also have had to negotiate the family's slightly dotty dowager, formerly Lady Emily Hill, the first Marchioness, until she perished in the flames of the Hatfield fire when he was five – the earliest of a serious of deaths and calamities that stood always at the young man's elbow.[2] His mother could not protect him for long – she fell ill and died in 1839 – and the hateful years at Eton might have proved a little more manageable had she been waiting at home. Yet even when there, her heart had belonged to the Duke of Wellington (or in Gladstone's memory to Lord Melbourne's father[3]) who did not become one of Salisbury's recollected reference points in the way that some other Tory statesmen did; he deafens by silence. But she had left behind a thicket of siblings that would obstruct or protect Salisbury's life at a number of points. There was James, the eldest son whose frailty turned to blindness, incapacity and early death, thus promoting his younger brother to the courtesy title, Lord Cranborne, in 1865. There were the two elder sisters. Mildred later married an eccentric scholar, churchman and parliamentarian Alexander James Beresford Beresford-Hope (he contrived to acquire the second 'Beresford' in 1854) and by so doing brought her brother within the ambit of a major publicist whose part ownership of the *Saturday Review* gave Lord Robert Cecil, as he then was, a much-needed start in journalism undertaken for money after his father had all but cut him off. Beresford-Hope will reappear in this story in the shadow of the nineteenth-century cathedrals whose history he wrote and as the

[1] Cecil, vol. I, p. 5.

[2] Professor John Vincent rightly feels compelled by them all. 'Not everyone has an incinerated grandmother, a mother untimely snatched, a brother dying by inches, a clan of Balfour pulmonaires (Arthur nearly one) ending with a spectacular Balfour death on Mont Blanc. It seems to go beyond the common lot.' (Private communication.)

[3] As late as 1890, Gladstone confided to Edward Hamilton that 'although it was not generally known, he believed there was a doubt as to the parentage of Lord Salisbury caused by the undue intimacy of his mother with Lord Melbourne (father of the Prime Minister)': diary, 19 Apr. 1890, in Dudley Bahlman (ed.), *The Diary of Edward Walter Hamilton, 1885–1906* (Hull, 1993).