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Introduction

Marlborough's earliest biographers were concerned to vindicate his reputation from the libels of hostile politicians and journalists. Both Francis Hare, whose *Life and Glorious History* appeared in 1705, and Thomas Lediard, who published a full *Life* in 1736, had served Marlborough personally, Hare as his chaplain, Lediard as an attaché during his mission to Altranstadt.[1] The latter based his work on wide manuscript materials and so has served as a quarry for later historians. This is also the case with William Coxe's *Memoirs of John, Duke of Marlborough* (1818–19) and the relevant portions of Onno Klopp's *Der Fall des Hauses Stuart* (Vienna, 1880–5). The latter is historiographically interesting because it reflects the ambivalence of contemporary Habsburg attitudes to Marlborough – unease at their unfortunately unavoidable dependence on him and predominantly Protestant allies, disgust at his betrayal of legitimist principles in 1688 and social contempt for an upstart who saw himself as the equal of hereditary princes.

In the second half of the eighteenth century three Scottish

[1] [Francis Hare], *The Life and Glorious History of John, Duke and Earl of Marlborough* (1705; 2nd edn 1707). See Robert D. Horn, 'Marlborough's first biographer: Dr Francis Hare', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 20 (1957), 145–6. Thomas Lediard, *The Life of John, Duke of Marlborough* (1736; 2nd edn 1743).

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exponents of the new Toryism produced new criticisms of Marlborough. David Hume in leading the rehabilitation of the Stuarts excoriated his behaviour in 1688. Sir John Dalrymple and James Macpherson published documents from the French and Jacobite archives compromising him as a traitor after as well as in 1688.[2] But it was the classical Whig historians of the nineteenth century who set out with effect to demolish his reputation. First Henry Hallam presented a ferocious indictment on moral grounds in his *History* (1827). Hallam found in his political career 'nothing but ambition and rapacity in his motives, nothing but treachery and intrigue in his means'. This moral line was continued by T.B. Macaulay in his most magisterial manner. In his essay on Hallam's *History* (1828) he depicted Marlborough as the product of an essentially corrupt Court: 'in no other age could the path to power and glory have been thrown open to the manifold infamies of Churchill'.[3]

Macaulay's hostile interpretation embodied not only early Victorian moral values but also the political principles and expectations of progressive, liberal Whigs. Unlike Hallam who doubted the wisdom of the 1832 Reform Act, Macaulay had no doubts about progressive development. For him Marlborough as a courtier and patronage broker belonged to an evil system, the Old Corruption whose remains liberal Whigs were eradicating. As a soldier-politician Marlborough disquietingly resembled Wellington, the arch-reactionary, and it was contrary to the principles of reformed representative government for the entire destiny of the nation to lie in

[2] David Hume, *The History of Great Britain* (2 vols., Edinburgh and London, 1754–7): this ended in 1688 with continuation volumes by Tobias Smollett. Sir John Dalrymple, *Memoirs of Great Britain and Ireland* (2 vols., 1771–3). James Macpherson, *Original Papers Containing the Secret History of Great Britain* (2 vols., 1775).

[3] Henry Hallam, *The Constitutional History of England* (3 vols., 1872), vol. III, p. 124–5. The first edition was in 1827, review by T. B. Macaulay, *Edinburgh Review*, September 1828.

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the hands of a single man, and particularly a soldier. Marlborough had been concerned with high politics – diplomacy on a continental scale, the subsidisation of allies, the internal policies of allied states, policies that depended on armed force or its threat for their implementation – not with reforms and the improvement of conditions of life.

However the main reason for Macaulay's harsh treatment of Marlborough is that he needed him as a villain to sustain the particular interpretation which he had formed. He discarded the stock condemnation of James II as a tyrant because this had been exploited by anti-Catholic demagogues to create prejudices that had obstructed Catholic emancipation and were still a potent force. Macaulay installed Marlborough as the replacement villain guilty of a succession of betrayals, particularly in 'revealing' the plans for an attack on Brest in the Camaret Bay letter. James in contrast was seen as foolish and gullible. Macaulay emulated Tacitus and Clarendon in inserting carefully crafted character sketches in his narrative, and these tended to be in stark tones of black and white: he unsparingly caricatured Marlborough as an odious careerist driven by ambition, avarice and an unbalanced wife who manipulated Anne without mercy.

Macaulay's artful selection of evidence to fit his case was exposed in devastating detail by John Paget, but the fully documented refutation came in Winston Churchill's four-volume biography published between 1933 and 1938.[4] He expanded Paget's condemnation of Macaulay's covert use of dubious sources, his unfailing readiness to attribute base motives and to accept unfavourable contemporary judge-

[4] John Paget, *The New Examen* (1861); essays previously published in *Blackwood's Magazine*. Winston S. Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (4 vols., 1933–8). See also C. H. Firth, *A Commentary on Macaulay* (1938). T. B. Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II* (6 vols., 1849–61); best edition is by C. H. Firth, 1913–15.

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ments. However Churchill had a wider purpose than just rehabilitating the reputation of his ancestor (as he had tried to do for his father): the biography was designed to warn his readers about the reappearance in Europe of a power even more intent than the France of Louis XIV on dominating all its neighbours. By the time of the publication of the third volume in 1936 the message became entirely explicit. Churchill wrote, 'the tale is rich in suggestion and instruction for the present day'. When he added in the Preface to the last volume, on 13 August 1938 not long before Munich, 'happy the state or sovereign who finds such a servant in years of danger', he was not so much celebrating Marlborough as hopefully anticipating his own return to power, given the blindness (as he saw it) of both the Chamberlain administration and the leaders of the Labour opposition.

There are two principal aspects of Churchill's work which are historiographically significant. First but unsurprisingly his interpretation reflected Churchill's own characteristics. He praised Marlborough for a major similarity with himself in not being a committed party man and his emphasis on the duke as the devoted servant of Anne reflected his own respect for the sovereign, quixotic in the case of Edward VIII, chivalrous towards Elizabeth II. Negatively Churchill failed to recognise Marlborough's declining physical and mental powers, as he was to refuse to acknowledge his own decline as he clung on to the premiership. Secondly the work which Churchill put into the examination of Marlborough's military and diplomatic leadership of the Grand Alliance proved to be an invaluable education for his own direction of Britain's war-effort in 1940–5. First and foremost it taught him that allied unity must be established and maintained if a predominant power was to be checked and defeated. In the 1930s Churchill was one of the very few (Belloc, also a student of Marlborough's career, was another) who saw how

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far British security depended on the French army: once this collapsed he saw the United States as the only reliable alternative. He knew from his researches that only intensive personal diplomacy, and constant correspondence, could produce the necessary understanding. Consequently, he risked his life in the dangerous flights to Tours and Briare in the desperate days of 1940, and his health by repeated journeys to talk to Roosevelt and Stalin, in the same fashion as Marlborough with his gruelling journeys (mostly in winter) to Vienna, Berlin, Hanover and Altranstadt.

Paradoxically Churchill found himself in 1941–5 occupying the same position of junior allied partner, with limited resources, as the Dutch Republic whose generals and field deputies he had bitterly criticised for obstructing Marlborough: his contribution to the partnership established with the United States owed much to his earlier appreciation of Marlborough's efforts to mitigate or remove friction between Britain and the Dutch.

Ironically Churchill's study of Marlborough did nothing to prepare him for a repetition of national 'ingratitude' in discarding the author of victory almost as soon as it was achieved. One of the architects of Churchill's defeat in the 1945 elections, Michael Foot, in his admiring study of Jonathan Swift (though a Tory), identified the common reason. By their journalistic polemics Swift and Foot changed public attitudes: each deployed the same arguments, that 'great men' are not indispensable, that the talents needed in waging war may be inappropriate in peacetime and that military men should always be subject to civil authority.[5]

Many military men, historians and even poets have concentrated their attention on Marlborough's military

[5] Michael Foot, *The Pen and the Sword* (1958).

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campaigns. Robert Southey, during his extremely brief revolutionary and anti-war phase, asserted that Blenheim was a sterile and wicked if famous victory.[6] Napoleon acknowledged Marlborough's talents (though an Englishman) but declined to include him in his list of the top seven generals with Turenne and Eugène (French after all by birth). In recent years military historians have extended the scope of their studies from the actual campaigns to examine the advances in the science of war for which Marlborough, more than any other man in his generation, was responsible and to show how he took full advantage of them. In a Whiggish fashion some have also related his career to the foundation of the British military tradition.[7]

The main emphasis in this study must be on the late flowering of Marlborough's military and diplomatic genius for the simple reason that he altered the history of Europe and Britain by his achievements during the War of the Spanish Succession. Anything else would be perverse and unbalanced. Marlborough followed the example of the French in regarding diplomacy and warfare as co-equal instruments of policy to be used alternatively or concurrently as circumstances demanded. Consequently his diplomatic activities receive considerable attention. As de facto head of a heterogeneous coalition of states he had constantly to reconcile the many differences between allies, to meet the grievances and interests of sovereigns and princes on whose armed contingents he absolutely depended and to prevent the repetition of breaches of undertakings. Similarly he had to try to reconcile the interests of allies with those of Britain,

[6] Robert Southey, 'After Blenheim', in Francis Palgrave (ed.), *The Golden Treasury* (Oxford, 1935), pp. 213–15.

[7] David Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander* (1973). Correlli Barnett, *Marlborough* (1974). I. F. Burton, *The Captain-General* (1968). G. M. Thomson, *The First Churchill* (1979).

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to keep a constant eye on the course of domestic politics and to give much-needed reassurance to his colleague lord treasurer Godolphin. And he bore all these tasks and coped with the stresses which they produced, which victories did not reduce or simplify, for a decade. Marlborough carried a crushing and multiple burden of responsibilities and work far greater and far more prolonged than has any other leader in British history: in a wider perspective only Napoleon surpassed him.

Napoleon, the devotee of Ossian, lived in an age which craved for and idolised heroes. By contrast in the Augustan period popular heroes were not yet in vogue, nor had media been developed specifically to project spectacular images of heroes. Hack poets produced routine panegyrics likening Marlborough to Scipio: tapestries and paintings decorated the walls of Blenheim Palace.[8] But public rituals of celebration, with the victorious general returning to the capital at the head of his troops, marching through purpose-built triumphal arches to the sound of martial music, were later inventions of the Romantic age. Popularity in Marlborough's time was suspect anyhow – the most popular man in Anne's reign was the contemptible high-flying cleric, Dr Sacheverell. Marlborough once commented to his wife that nobody in any great station of life could expect to be liked.

One main thesis in this study is that Marlborough's formative experience was as a courtier. He retained courtly characteristics throughout his life, notably the practice of the art of dissimulation. By iron self-control he invariably succeeded in concealing his inner feelings. Despite constant stress and frequent provocations he maintained a courteous and affable manner. His charm, generally remarked on by

[8] Robert D. Horn, *Marlborough: A Survey Panegyrics, Satires and Biographical Writings* (Folkestone, 1975). Alan Wace, *The Marlborough Tapestries at Blenheim Palace* (1968).

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contemporaries, became increasingly impressive as his greatness grew: for the most influential and successful man in Europe to be free from arrogance and overbearing pride came as a surprise. Marlborough could achieve this extraordinary modesty of demeanour only by his practice of frequently retiring into privacy. Conventional acquaintances criticised him for not entertaining lavishly at army headquarters and for living simply and inexpensively with a few assistant colleagues. Psychologically such withdrawals from constant scrutiny and lobbying were necessary if he was to maintain an outward appearance of calm, confidence and self-possession. But his smooth, emollient exterior, the detached dignity which he sustained on the battlefield and in the council chamber, make it difficult for historians to get at the man himself, to explore his feelings as well as his thoughts, for the latter can be read and evaluated in his copious correspondence.

The opportunities which came to Marlborough after 1702 were largely due to his, and his wife's, attachment to Anne during the reign of 'Caliban', William III. But Sarah's importance in the partnership which subsequently developed between Anne, the duke and duchess and Godolphin, should not be overstated. From as early as 1704–5 her friendship with Anne began to disintegrate, and after 1706 the relationship became damagingly negative. Sarah's freely revealed Whig opinions and prejudices influenced Godolphin and compromised Marlborough. Her manner was the opposite to that of her husband: she was open, passionate and obstinate, restlessly busy and indiscreet. Although they were much in love to the end, Sarah cannot have been an easy person to be married to, but in her different and at times complementary way – encouraging and soothing him – she was as much a unique phenomenon in that age as her husband. Her spirit and abilities were, despite an inadequate

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education, more than a match for almost all her male contemporaries. No other wife of a leading British statesman, let alone a soldier, has ever had such a high profile or given so much well-intended support to her husband's career.[9]

[9] Frances Harris, *A Passion for Government: The Life of Sarah Duchess of Marlborough* (Oxford, 1991): an excellent new study. Iris Butler, *Rule of Three: Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough and her Companions in Power* (1967).

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Chapter 1

The rise to greatness

John Churchill came from an obscure family of minor provincial gentry impoverished by the Civil Wars.[1] Its only real asset were social connections which enabled John's father Sir Winston to find places for his children at Court; thereafter everything depended on their using their opportunities to advance themselves. In the first decades after the Restoration the ruling class had not yet narrowed into an oligarchy, and ministers and leading politicians who originated in the gentry (although mostly from families more substantial than the Churchills) outnumbered those from established aristocratic and Court families and connections. Several upward routes existed for the politically and socially ambitious, of which the commonest way was through leadership in Parliament combined with patronage management, direction of royal finances or the execution of other major administrative and legal functions. But with the exception of Monck and possibly Sandwich, and both earned their distinction by bringing about the Restoration, nobody rose to the very top through military or naval service.

Certainly John Churchill did not. He owed his rise to prominence and great influence to his skills as a courtier, not

[1] For the Churchill family see A. L. Rowse, *The Early Churchills* (1956), and Winston S. Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (4 vols., 1933–8), vol. I.

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