

Opening the “Magic Casements” of the Mind:

The Education of Winston Churchill

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OF all the books that Winston Churchill wrote, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* has been the most popular.¹ Never out of print since it first appeared in 1930, it has been translated into dozens of languages and has charmed generations of readers. When Churchill wrote it, he was in his fifties, had held every important cabinet office in the British government, except the foreign ministry and the prime ministry, and for three decades had been known to the public as his friend F. E. Smith, the First Earl of Birkenhead, described him in a biographical sketch in 1924: “one of the most remarkable men now living...as arresting and as bewildering as any in the world.”²

Churchill’s propensity to command public attention recommended his writings to a wide audience, who discovered in them the same exuberance that his fellow parliamentarians found in his speeches or his friends in his conversation. When Churchill turned the tables on F. E. Smith and wrote his own biographical sketch of his friend, he said that the First Earl “seemed to have a double dose of human nature.”³ So it seemed with Churchill himself, and readers of his autobiography, discovering in it his eagerness “to hear the whistle of bullets all around and to play at hazard from moment to moment with death and wounds” (90), may find it hard to believe his insouciance in the face of war and death.

The First World War had changed the outlook of the British public, and Churchill knew that “the minds of this generation, exhausted, brutalised, mutilated and bored by War” (91), might not be able to sympathize with his youthful eagerness to be under fire. Indeed, this transformation is a theme in his autobiography: he remarks in the preface that *My Early Life* “as a whole” offers “a picture of a vanished age,” enumerating the changes that have occurred on account of the war and particularly drawing our attention to the change in “the outlook of youth.”

¹ Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (London: Thornton Butterworth Limited, 1930). Parenthetical references in this introduction refer to page numbers in this edition.

² The Earl of Birkenhead, *Contemporary Personalities* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd, 1924), 113.

³ “F. E.’ First Earl of Birkenhead” was first published as “Life of Lord Birkenhead by His Son.—1. ‘F. E.’ to the World and to His Friends” in the *Daily Telegraph* (April 6, 1933), 12, and reprinted four years later in Winston S. Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd., 1937), 171–83; the quotation is on 183.

He does not think that all these changes are “for the better” (9). A later generation’s rejection of the bravery or even recklessness of Churchill’s youth may have been too drastic a correction. He thinks a time may come—it may have come already—when young Britons will need more of the love of “adventure, and adventure for adventure’s sake” (94), that his own early life exemplifies in great measure. He does not consider the changes in the outlook of youth irreversible, and he offers “the new generation” his own “story of youthful endeavour” (10) to encourage and rekindle the spirited part of their souls. Churchill summons young people who are drifting in an eddy of mass effects to surmount their selfish fear of death, aiming to stir up unselfish endeavor in them. Lest anyone mistake his intention in writing the book, he dedicates it “TO A NEW GENERATION” (7).⁴

The autobiography’s subtitle “A Roving Commission,” which changed places with its title in American editions for the first three decades,⁵ makes a similar point. Rather than understanding the events of his life as happenstance, Churchill considers them a commission. His life has a purpose that cannot be achieved simply by staying put. When other people wonder—as they did—“Who the devil is this fellow? How has he managed to get to these different campaigns?” (177), they reckon without the ambition, the determination, and the imagination that Churchill used in his early twenties to conjure himself to a series of battlefields, and even to change careers, in order to follow his star. He was never content to settle into a routine, to follow a route traced by others, or simply to accept what luck had to offer, though he was hardly immune to luck’s surprises. As he told the future prime minister’s daughter Violet Asquith when he met her at dinner a few years later, in summer 1906, “We are all worms. But I do believe that I am a glow-worm.”⁶

⁴ Alas, the dedication was left out of the latest American edition of the book, Winston Churchill, *My Early Life, 1874–1904* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

⁵ The first American edition is *Winston S. Churchill, A Roving Commission: My Early Life* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1930). Not until Churchill’s last luster did an American reprint, *Winston S. Churchill, My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), adopt the British title—which has since been used, often without the subtitle, on both sides of the Atlantic.

⁶ Violet Bonham Carter, *Winston Churchill as I Knew Him* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), 16.

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One striking feature of *My Early Life* is the young Churchill's fascination with death, which is evident even in his childhood. In the first chapter, he tells of a visit to a pantomime in Dublin which had to be cancelled because the theatre burned down; its manager perished in the fire (15–16). Winston himself was riding his donkey when his nurse thought she spied a threatening procession of Fenians, Irish nationalists; thrown to the ground when the donkey was spooked, he suffered a concussion (16). Soon after he returned to England, he heard that an under-secretary named Mr. Burke, who had given him a drum, had been murdered in the same Phoenix Park where Churchill had lived a few years earlier (17). In Ventnor, on the Isle of Wight, he saw the wreck of the training ship *Eurydice*, which capsized in a storm that sent hundreds of sailors to their watery deaths; Churchill tells of horrified divers who saw “fish eating the bodies of the poor soldiers” whose remains they had dived to recover. He remembers the Tay Bridge disaster, when scores of passengers died as a Scottish bridge collapsed and their train plunged into the river below (21). He also recalls the death of Disraeli (22) and his own close brush with death from double pneumonia at his second school in Hove, near Brighton (27). When Churchill was slightly older, he suddenly found himself at risk of drowning when a gust of wind blew his rowboat away while he was swimming with a younger boy in Switzerland's Lake Lausanne (51–52).⁷

Most of these instances involve the risk of death from natural disasters or sudden murder by political enemies. But another adventure offered more scope for courage, or rather recklessness. During a game of tag with his brother and a cousin at his aunt's estate at Bournemouth when Churchill was eighteen, cornered by his pursuers at opposite ends of a bridge over a chine, or ravine, he escaped by jumping over the edge, hoping that the branches of a fir tree would break his fall on the way down. After falling “29 feet on to hard ground,” he was unconscious for three days, suffering a concussion and serious injuries, including a ruptured kidney. Only an exceptional surgeon

⁷ Curiously he forbears to mention that the younger boy was his brother Jack. See Celia and John Lee, *Winston and Jack: The Churchill Brothers* (Chatham: Celia Lee, 2007), 117–18.

and Churchill's "own pronounced will-to-live" kept him alive: "for a year," he recalls, "I looked at life round a corner" (44). Most people would rather have been caught.

While Churchill was at Sandhurst, his "greatest pleasure" was riding horses. He urges parents, especially wealthy parents, to give their sons horses rather than money (59)—advice that he followed in the case of his daughter Mary, to whom he gave money to buy a horse in 1943.⁸

Churchill writes,

No one ever came to grief—except honourable grief—through riding horses. No hour of life is lost that is spent in the saddle. Young men have often been ruined through owning horses, or through backing horses, but never through riding them; unless of course they break their necks, which, taken at a gallop, is a very good death to die. (59)

Here Churchill prefers an active, risky pursuit that involves the care of a large, spirited animal, because it equips the rider for hunting, war, and polo and appeals to the spirited part of the human soul, to pastimes that are safer and more sedate.

Though he knew as a small child in Ireland—where his parents "hunted continually on their large horses," his mother clad "in a riding habit, fitting like a skin and often beautifully spotted with mud"—that they might be in danger when one or the other of them was late returning home from riding (18), those scares paled beside the greatest loss Churchill suffered in his early life: his father's death in his forty-sixth year and Winston's twenty-first. The few "long and intimate conversations" that Churchill had been able to enjoy with his father (45)—who, in the words of F. E. Smith, "discerned nothing remarkable, nothing of singular promise in a very remarkable and original boy"⁹—only magnified the loss he felt at Lord Randolph's early death. "For years" he had "read every word" his father spoke (46) and to the boy "he seemed to own the key to everything or almost everything worth having" (60); now Winston would have to live with the "regret that we did not live

⁸ See his note to his daughter Mary on her twenty-first birthday on September 15, 1943, with his drawing of a leaping horse and the notation "Towards a hunter," in the collection of America's National Churchill Museum, Fulton, Missouri. Enclosed with the note was a generous check, which she used to buy a horse after the war.

⁹ The Earl of Birkenhead, *Contemporary Personalities*, 113.

long enough in company to know each other” (62). Lord Randolph’s early demise only heightened his son’s apprehension that he too might be susceptible to a brief span on earth, making him the more eager to find “the swift road to promotion and advancement” (88).

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When Churchill sought “a private rehearsal, a secluded trial trip” (90), to be sure he was cut out for brave deeds in war, he attached himself to a Spanish column in Cuba that wound around the countryside in a vain effort to suppress the native rebellion against Spanish rule. He looked forward to the adventure, feeling sure that it would be “awfully jolly” (93); but when a nearby horse came under fire, he “began to take a more thoughtful view” of things (96), and when he came under fire himself, on or more likely around his twenty-first birthday, Churchill was grateful for a fat Spanish officer whose hammock was slung between his own bed and the line of fire (99). In retrospect he admits that travelling “thousands of miles with money one can ill afford...in the hope of getting into a scrape in the company of perfect strangers, is certainly hardly a rational proceeding” (94).

As his roving commission took him, in subsequent years, to battlefields on three continents, from Cuba to the Northwest Frontier of India to the Sudan to South Africa, his appreciation for the risks of war grew. His enjoyment of the adventure of war never left him. In *My Early Life* he describes his encounter with Pathan tribesmen in the Mamund Valley as an “enjoyable skirmish” which “gave everyone the greatest pleasure” (153). He remembers reconnoitering the battlefield at Omdurman early in the morning before the battle, remarking that “for cool, tense excitement I commend such moments” (197), and later, when the enemy began to charge, tells us, “This is an hour to live” (198). He describes his final campaign in the Boer War as “a jolly march,” revelling in the recollection of “the wonderful air and climate of South Africa, the magnificent scale of its landscape, [and] the life of unceasing movement and of continuous incident” (359).

Churchill found that mortal stakes magnified life and dispelled lesser problems that crowded his mind in more humdrum times. But, when he and another officer lost two of eight Sikhs in their unit killed and three wounded in fighting on the Northwest Frontier, he realized ruefully that “it was not apparently all a gay adventure” (160). After the 21st Lancers’ cavalry charge at the Battle of

Omdurman, he saw “horses spouting blood, struggling on three legs, men staggering on foot, men bleeding from terrible wounds, fish-hook spears stuck right through them, arms and faces cut to pieces, bowels protruding, men gasping, crying, collapsing, expiring” (208). His anticipation of war became mixed with the realization that war was cruel (79).

What Churchill calls the “scale of values” (9) in the little wars of his youth was revolutionized by new weaponry in the First World War. He explains that the campaign against the Dervishes “was full of fascinating thrills,” but “nobody expected to be killed.” In the Great War, however, “the hazards were reversed,” and even if you survived one tornado, you knew you “would certainly be consumed in the next or the next after that” (195). Instead of being “cruel and magnificent,” war became “cruel and squalid,” with whole peoples trying to exterminate each other. Churchill blames it on “Democracy and Science,” which have deprived soldiers of the chance to win glory in war and made it no longer “a gentleman’s game” (79).

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From his nurse, Mrs. Everest, who loved and cared for him when he was a child more than his mother, whom he admired from afar (19), Churchill learned to suspect High Anglican ceremonies (26). When students at his school were ushered into seats facing north and south in the Chapel Royal in Brighton and then turned to the east to recite the creed, he refused to move; but his teachers made no comment on his demonstration. Later, when the students sat in seats facing east, he had no chance to “testify against” a practice that Mrs. Everest would have considered “Popish.” Churchill writes that the ladies who ran the school were “thoughtful and ingenious” to accommodate his objection, because he never had such scruples again, but instead gave himself up “complacently to a broad-minded tolerance and orthodoxy” (28).

That broad-minded tolerance, which was encouraged among army officers in India by the experience of living amid a great variety of religions, tended to detach Churchill from adherence to specifically Christian beliefs. At Harrow School he had attended Sunday services and morning and evening prayers during the week. But in India, no one cared whether he marched the Roman Catholics to church or the Protestants. He and his brother officers encountered “the deities of a

hundred creeds,” which “were placed by respectful routine in the Imperial Pantheon.” Indeed, he found that “religious tolerance in the British Army had spread till it overlapped the regions of indifference.” His regular attendance at church came to an end, reduced for the rest of his life to appearances for “weddings, christenings, and funerals.” Churchill remembers that

In the regiment we sometimes used to argue questions like “Whether we should live again in another world after this was over?” “Whether we have ever lived before?” “Whether we remember and meet each other after Death or merely start again like the Buddhists?” “Whether some high intelligence is looking after the world or whether things are just drifting on somehow?” There was general agreement that if you tried your best to live an honourable life and did your duty and were faithful to friends and not unkind to the weak and poor, it did not matter much what you believed or disbelieved. All would come out right.

He concludes, borrowing his description from the Harvard psychologist William James, that “This is what would nowadays I suppose be called “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness” (128).

Some of the senior officers approved of religion because it helped to keep women and “the lower orders” straight (128) and encouraged people to live better. But possessors of this utilitarian view of religion were hardly devout. Churchill went further than his brother officers, reading books like Winwood Reade’s *Martyrdom of Man*, which challenged his “whole religious education” and led him “to the depressing conclusion that we simply go out like candles.” His reading left him “indignant at having been told so many untruths, as I then regarded them,” and he “passed through a violent and aggressive anti-religious phase which, had it lasted, might easily have made me a nuisance.” What restored his “poise,” however, was the “frequent contact with danger” that he made in his profession at arms over the next few years: for he found himself never loath “to ask for special protection when about to come under the fire of the enemy” (129). He learned to live with the contradiction between his skeptical reasoning and his “comforting” practice of asking for divine help and protection, which provided a counterpoise to his doubts about religion (130).

The question that Churchill is revolving here is what his place is in the universe: how his own life fits into a larger plan. He is looking for an answer to the question of how he should live and

what his posture should be toward the world around him. He tells us in his autobiography that “the staple of this story” consists of the years between 1895 and 1900, when he was “twenty to twenty-five.” During those years young people discover who they are, form habits that they follow through all their years, and take the first crucial steps to reach places to which they aspire in life. In a famous exhortation to “young men, all over the world,” Churchill stirs them up, urging them never to submit to failure and not to “be fobbed off with mere personal success or acceptance.” Living honorably is not just private life or personal prospering; it means embracing an “inheritance” of civilization and accepting a “responsibility” for preserving and advancing it by serving the public and taking one’s place “in life’s fighting line.” Looking back on those years as he writes in 1930, Churchill “cannot but return my sincere thanks to the high gods for the gift of existence” (74). He likens the world as it opened up to him after his time in school to “Aladdin’s cave” (73), where a rub of the lamp produces a genie who will make one’s wishes come true. What he means is that life is sweet, so that the fundamental human posture should be one of gratitude—but it is telling that he offers his thanks to plural gods, in the way of the pagan Greeks or Romans, rather than to the monotheistic God of Christians or Jews. Churchill’s “poise” makes him willing to weave the Christian notion of mercy into his understanding of the good life, along with the older virtues of pagan antiquity.

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In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Professor Allan Bloom remarks that “man has always had to come to terms with God, love and death.”¹⁰ Churchill’s account of his early life raises all three of these subjects. We have touched on his treatment of God and death, but *My Early Life* might seem curiously silent about love. Certainly by contrast with current practice by personalities in the public eye, Churchill maintains a gentlemanly discretion about his love life. In these years he and his brother cadets at Sandhurst frequented the Empire Theatre of Varieties in London’s Leicester

¹⁰ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 230.

Square, a haunt for high-class prostitutes, where he gave his first public speech, bidding fellow theatre-goers to demolish barricades between the seats and the bar recently erected by “Prudes on the Prowl” to discourage fraternization with these ladies (70). The crowd of onlookers surely included them, for Churchill began his speech, “Ladies of the Empire, I stand for liberty...,”¹¹ but there is no evidence that he consorted with them himself. He does mention that “war service” made young men glamorous in the eyes of “young ladies” (88) and that “the young soldier who had been ‘on active service’ and ‘under fire’ had an *aura* about him” that was recognized by “the girls he courted” (89), so he seems not indifferent to love. Biographers tell us he proposed marriage to Ethel Barrymore and Pamela Plowden, both of whom refused him,¹² but he breathes no word of this to the reader of his autobiography. Passing over in silence the eventful half-decade from 1903 to 1908, in the course of which he was appointed to several cabinet offices, Churchill ends the book in September 1908,¹³ “when I married and lived happily ever afterwards” (385). His abrupt fairy-tale tribute to his wife Clementine, which is the more wonderful for being true, does not even name her. As this ending suggests, Churchill thought that marriage marked the end of a man’s early life.

In its first volume, written by Churchill’s son Randolph, the official biography of Winston Churchill lifts the curtain a bit on the crux of his unsuccessful courtship of Pamela Plowden, when the young suitor sends her what the French call a *billet doux*, telling her he loves “one above all others” and promising to tell her “over the page” who that is. On the other side of the page was only his signature, “Winston S. Churchill,” preceded by the complimentary close “Yours v[er]y sincerely.”¹⁴ The young lady might therefore have doubted that he really loved her. But *My Early Life* makes clear that Churchill did not love only himself. Though he never went to college—he was tempted to go to Oxford after he was already an army officer, but shrank from “toiling at Greek

¹¹ Quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Churchill’s Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 1.

¹² See, for instance, Paul Addison, *Winston Churchill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.

¹³ Thus the range of dates adopted as the subtitle of the recent American edition already mentioned, “1874–1904,” has no basis in the text.

¹⁴ Randolph S. Churchill, Martin Gilbert, and Larry P. Arnn, *Winston S. Churchill*, 8 narrative and 23 document vols. (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2006–19), I 425–26.

irregular verbs after having commanded British regular troops” (217)—the most memorable chapter in the book describes his education at Bangalore, when he taught himself about ethics, Socrates, history, philosophy, economics, “and things like that” (125), reading “four or five hours every day” during the hot Indian afternoons while the other officers slept (126). His “love of learning” gleams from the pages of his book, which describes his conversations with the authors he read and his fellow officers. Churchill’s book is rich in incident, and from it we learn what gave rise to personal characteristics that define the man: his habit of taking a siesta after lunch, which he borrowed from the Spaniards whom he accompanied in Cuba (95); his success on the Northwest Frontier in overcoming his “repugnance to the taste of whisky,” which he “must ever regard as a good gift of the gods” (141); his propensity to fight “wars and other contentions with might and main till overwhelming victory,” and afterwards to offer “the hand of friendship to the vanquished” (346). What we receive from *My Early Life* is the education of Winston Churchill, who wrote the book to show his reader how “knowledge and thought would open the ‘magic casements’ of the mind” (53).¹⁵

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Autobiographies are one of two kinds of books frequently published by politicians, along with books of speeches. Our Solons offer them to the public after they retire or have suffered electoral reverses and their party is out of office, hoping to keep their names before the public. Usually what they have to say is banal, self-serving, poorly written, forgettable—and soon forgotten. Often these books are ghost-written. Churchill, who published both kinds of books, was by the time he wrote *My Early Life* at the beginning of the long lull in his political career that biographers have called his “wilderness years,” an experienced professional writer who had earned his livelihood as a journalist and author since his early twenties. His love of words and his wide reading, made the more serviceable by a prodigious memory inherited from his father, and joined to powers of concentration

¹⁵ Churchill quotes here John Keats’s poem “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819), with which our author made his acquaintance not in school, but afterwards owing to Violet Asquith, as she tells us at the beginning of her book: see *Winston Churchill as I Knew Him*, 16.

and hard work that more indolent members of the leisured class were startled to behold in a scion of the aristocracy, had given Churchill the ability to write a shelfful of long and substantial books before he set out to write his autobiography. Although in his mature years he made use of research assistants and enlisted others to write papers that eventually contributed to his books—especially after his wartime prime ministry, when he relied on a team of talented scholars to prepare drafts of his Second World War memoirs and to help him finish his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*—only in unusual cases did these drafts serve as more than raw material, as those who contributed to his books attest in their memoirs. Rarely did he publish anything under his name that drew on such drafts without putting his own stamp on it. Often he drew on his experience and his instinctive grasp of politics to tell the story from a different angle or endow it with a better explanation, in the process turning someone’s workmanlike screed into sparkling prose that is recognizably Churchillian. So we should mostly acquit him of the charge of plagiarism that still circulates among envious professors and others who sympathize with his political opponents.

Churchill begins the preface to *My Early Life* by telling us that in endeavoring to relate his “early life and adventures” by bringing “the whole together in a single complete story” in his autobiography, he has searched his memory and “most carefully verified my facts from the records which I possess” (9)—which would seem to rule out careless or unintentional errors on his part. His statement makes his departures from the true story of his early life the more curious. Surely it is an exaggeration to say, as one of his biographers did privately, that *My Early Life* is a tissue of lies, yet we cannot form a true appreciation of the book without asking how true it is. Whether Churchill really was shot at on his twenty-first birthday in Cuba, or whether, as seems much more likely according to the best scholarly investigation of the facts, his baptism of fire occurred a day or two later, is not too important: a story so good deserves to be true, whether it is or not, and in any case it is close to the truth. Churchill did not excel as a classical scholar in school, but his denial that he ever wrote “any Latin verse” or learned “any Greek except the alphabet” (27), which a beginner learns on the first day of instruction, is belied by his teachers’ recollections and by records at Harrow

School. So he cannot be acquitted of some exaggeration, although exaggerating one's own inability is irony, a lesser and rarer vice than boasting.

In some ways Churchill's autobiography seems like fiction to young people the same age he was during "the years 1895 to 1900 which are the staple of the story" (74). If my university students used to call *My Early Life* a novel, unaware that a novel means a fictional story, they may still be putting their finger on an important question about the book. Churchill's autobiography resembles what the Germans call a *Bildungsroman*—a novel about the education of a young person, growing up and trying to make his way in life. Young people in the twenty-first century are still attracted to the book because, as Churchill foresaw, they are interested "to read a story of youthful endeavour," so they enjoy reading Churchill's candid account, set out "with as much simplicity as possible," of his "personal fortunes" (10). Yet they find it hard to conceive of his being able to have such an adventurous life, and therefore the book seems to be fiction and to have some of the same appeal as the *Harry Potter* books—some of the few books that most of them have read before they come to the university—or perhaps, for those who have read more, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The appeal of Churchill's book is heightened by the fact that his thoughts and adventures are so much more exciting than theirs that, chastened by the realization of what they are missing in a duller and more ordinary life, especially if they are naturally spirited, they long for the excitement of his life and wonder how they can find at least some of it, or something more like it, for themselves. Churchill's unforgettable rousing of "young men, all over the world" (74) leaves them dissatisfied with anything less. And if Churchill's adventures are true as well as exciting, then such adventures might be a life worth choosing, rather than just an escape from a dull life.

But the most notable departure from the truth in *My Early Life* is curious and hard to explain, given our author's deserved reputation for veracity. Churchill, who made his start in life as a soldier and war correspondent with an eye on making a name that would pave his way to a political career in Parliament, weaves some of the most memorable adventures in his autobiography—his first two experiences of war as a soldier of the Queen, on the Northwest Frontier of India in 1897 and in the Sudan in 1898, into a mistaken chronology that puts them before his first attempts to

enter Parliament in the same years. So far from his having “most carefully verified my facts,” he seems to have deliberately obfuscated the reader’s understanding of what he did first and what he did later. Not only does he tell his story out of order, describing his first official political speech at Bath, which took place in July 1897 *before* he fought in India and the Sudan, after his account of his part in those campaigns in the book, but he also writes how he was introduced by the chairman at that speech: “As for my adventures in Cuba, on the Indian frontier and up the Nile, I can only pray the regiment would never hear of what the Chairman said” (220). In fact, they could never have heard of what the chairman said, nor could the chairman have ever have said it, nor had Churchill any need to pray about it, because, aside from his private trial of war with the Spanish soldiers in Cuba two years earlier, he had not yet experienced any of those adventures as a soldier of the Queen when he stood up to give the speech.

I was curious enough about the mistaken chronology in *My Early Life* to ask his late daughter Mary what she thought of it. She said she had not noticed it: although she had read the book when it was published, she was only eight years old, and those adventures had happened several decades before she was born. She told me her father must simply have mixed up the details of chronology in writing the book. With the greatest respect for his daughter’s judgment, I find it hard to believe that her father did not deliberately make a poetic postponement of his political ambition. It was not infrequently criticized at the time for being too forward and precocious, for instance, as Churchill tells us, by the Prince of Wales (170–71). In the first edition of one of his early books, *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan*, which tells the story of the Nile campaign, in describing how Mohammed Ahmed rose to power, proclaimed himself the Mahdi, and led a rebellion against Egyptian imperialism in the Sudan, Churchill writes that “all great men are ambitious in their youth” (I 37) and sympathizes with Mohammed Ahmed’s character and achievements. In the second edition of the book, his statement about the ambition of great men in their youth disappears. Later, when Churchill wrote *My Early Life*, he was much more aware of the importance of not seeming to be ambitious to a fault. But I dare say he was impenitent.