

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Summer 2020

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Churchill's Marlborough: The Character of a Trimmer

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Abstract: Winston Churchill constructed the Marlborough that he presented in the four-volume biography he published between 1933 and 1938 on the model of George Savile, marquess of Halifax's "character of a trimmer." For much of Marlborough's career, he refused to assign limits to his political art and thought instead in terms of a new, and distinctly modern, mobility in politics and war, property, and public reputation. Faced with political adversity late in his career, Marlborough's commitment to statesmanship as a mobile, or trimming, capacity waned and he retreated from politics. Churchill was aware that, for a generation that had endured the war of 1914–1918 only to face the Nazi menace, such a retreat from politics was a contemporary temptation. *Marlborough* is a warning against this temptation and a defiant recommitment to a politics that would defend Whig ideals.

This essay proposes a new approach to an understanding of the argument of *Marlborough*, Winston Churchill's biography of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English statesman and general John Churchill. The biography's four volumes appeared between October 1933, not long after differences with Conservative Party leadership led Winston Churchill to resign from the shadow cabinet, and September 1938, shortly before Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich and Winston Churchill responded with his "Disaster of the First Magnitude" speech.¹ These four volumes range widely over the "life and times" of Winston Churchill's most celebrated ancestor. The first volume turns on the critical role that John Churchill played in making possible, and then securing, the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689. The second volume examines the first years of the War of Spanish Succession. It traces John Churchill's role in assembling the Grand Alliance against Louis XIV in 1701 and concludes with the battle of Blenheim in 1704. It was

¹ See Frederick Woods, *A Bibliography of the Works of Sir Winston Churchill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 67–77, on the publishing history of *Marlborough*.

this battle that, according to Winston Churchill, set England on the path of imperial greatness. It was also this battle that led Queen Anne to make John Churchill the Duke of Marlborough and to bestow on him the parks around Woodstock near Oxford that would gradually become home to Blenheim Palace. Volume III combines the Duke of Marlborough's continuing military successes at the battles of Ramillies in 1706 and Oudenarde in 1708 with his increasing difficulties holding together the Grand Alliance and managing English party politics. The carnage of the battle of Malplaquet in 1709 sets the tone for the fourth volume. Here Winston Churchill recounts the Duke of Marlborough's declining fortunes in English politics—his increasing isolation, his dismissal, the peculation charge, and finally exile—before a partial rehabilitation with the accession of the Hanoverian George I in 1714.²

One of Churchill's aims was to complete this rehabilitation, and there is no question that the biography is emphatically revisionist. Churchill, who had been born at Blenheim Palace, now took the moment of his own exit from office to challenge both the image of a second Cromwell that was promoted by contemporary Tory publicists such as Jonathan Swift and the image of the duplicitous intriguer who features in the works of later Whig historians, most notably Thomas Babington Macaulay. To this end Churchill made extensive use of the ducal archives, printing much previously unpublished correspondence. The purpose of this essay is not, however, to provide a historiographical reassessment of Churchill's revisionist portrait of the Duke of Marlborough.³ While Churchill's prose remains inimitable and *Marlborough*, for all its more than two thousand pages, can be a compelling read, the biography's scholarly achievement has long been overtaken by the subsequent work of, among others, David Chandler and Richard Holmes.⁴ Rather, my purpose is to suggest how Churchill used his biography of the Duke of Marlborough to discuss what is required of a statesman in violent and chaotic times.

² Henceforth the simple last name "Churchill" will refer to Winston Churchill and "Marlborough" or "the Duke of Marlborough" will refer to John Churchill. Italics will refer to the book *Marlborough*.

³ Two of Churchill's research assistants provide the classical assessments: Maurice Ashley, *Churchill as Historian* (New York: Scribner's, 1968), chap. 10, on *Marlborough* and F. W. Deakin, "Churchill the Historian," special supplement to *Schweizer Monatshefte* 49, no. 4 (1969/1970): 1–19. See also J. H. Plumb, "The Historian," in *Churchill Revised: A Critical Assessment* (New York: Dial, 1969), 148–53, on *Marlborough* and, more recently, Peter Clarke, *Mr. Churchill's Profession: The Statesman as Author and the Book That Defined the "Special Relationship"* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 152–94.

⁴ David G. Chandler, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1994) and Richard Holmes, *Marlborough: England's Fragile Genius* (London: HarperPress, 2008). For recent developments in Marlborough scholarship, see Tobias Roeder, "Scipio or Crassus? The Contested Heroic Image of John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough (1650–1722)," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 96 (2018): 1–20.

It would be natural to think that scholars would long ago have exhausted much of what there is to say about how the Marlborough biography shaped Winston Churchill's understanding of statesmanship. After all, Churchill devoted the eight years before he returned to government as first lord of the admiralty in 1939 and prime minister in 1940 to the project. Yet there are major biographies of Winston Churchill that make no mention of *Marlborough* or that mention only the work's existence without even a perfunctory analysis.⁵ Even when *Marlborough* is mentioned, the assessment can be dismissive. For some, an aging curmudgeon found solace in a backward-looking exercise in family piety and aristocratic nostalgia.⁶ For others, a dispirited Churchill abandoned himself to antiquarian "delvings."⁷ For most, *Marlborough* is a place-holding monument: it is worthy perhaps of a bit of exposition but its role in Churchill's political career does not go beyond an unspecified but largely inert "inspiration."⁸

This essay is far closer in its assessment to that small handful of scholars who, like Leo Strauss, have recognized *Marlborough* as one of the great historical works of the twentieth century and who understand that its four volumes constitute the most extended statement of Churchill's political philosophy.⁹ This said, I will argue that the conception of statesmanship that Churchill works out in *Marlborough* looks less to the recovery of classical political rationalism than to "the legitimacy of the modern age."¹⁰ This argument will unfold in three steps. First, I want to unpack what Churchill may have meant by violent and chaotic times. These times were violent and chaotic because, Churchill understood, they corresponded to a profound caesura in the history of Western political thought. This caesura—to use the later terminology of John Dunn—saw the loss of the theocentric framework that still informed the political thought of the Duke of Marlborough's older contemporary John Locke. In its place began to emerge an "impressively disenchanting"

⁵ For example, Geoffrey Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁶ David Cannadine, "Winston Churchill as an Aristocratic Adventurer," in *Aspects of Aristocracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 152–53, and echoed later in the essay collection *In Churchill's Shadow: Confronting the Past in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷ Manfred Weidhorn, *Sir Winston Churchill* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 20.

⁸ For example, Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1991).

⁹ Morton J. Frisch, "The Intentions of Churchill's *Marlborough*," *Polity* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 560–74, and Morton J. Frisch, review of the University of Chicago edition of *Marlborough* in *Interpretation* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 179–93.

¹⁰ The reference is to Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

conception of order that human practical reason negotiated through the historical process.¹¹

The second section of this essay examines how this loss of theological or even natural assurance shaped Churchill's assessment of his ancestor's achievement. To be sure, Churchill's Marlborough would be the carrier of Whig ideals: he appears as a defender of English law and the English constitution, of "the freedom of the Protestant religion" and "the rights of Parliamentary government." For Churchill, these ideals had "lighted and guarded the Age of Reason and prepared the civilization of the nineteenth century."¹² Yet Churchill warned against seeing Marlborough as a passive agent of design in history.¹³ Rather the Marlborough that Churchill presents actively achieved these ideals through the "rough and tumble" of a modern politics. Churchill's Marlborough thought in terms of "moving forces." He did not "assign limits"—either ideological or moral—to his political art.¹⁴ He would deploy a full range of practical skills in ever-shifting "combinations"—what the duke's contemporaries called "trimming"—in order better to navigate the fog of imponderables that had enveloped the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

In short, Churchill's *Marlborough* works in the mode of what one scholar called "disenchanted Whiggism."¹⁵ Given what *Marlborough* teaches about a trimming origin of Whig ideals, the last sections of the essay will consider how Churchill understood the Duke of Marlborough's "fall." The essay will conclude by asking what significance this understanding might have had for Churchill's approach to his own violent and chaotic times.



One approach to Churchill's major writings is to read them as a sustained reflection on an interrelated set of developments that shaped the distinctive character of modern political life. For example, Churchill's first major

¹¹ John Dunn, "From Applied Theology to Social Analysis: The Break between John Locke and the Scottish Enlightenment," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 119–35.

¹² Winston S. Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), I:512. Unattributed references throughout this article should be understood to refer to this work.

¹³ I:829.

¹⁴ I:340.

¹⁵ Charles Sullivan, "The Disenchanted Whiggism of Winston Churchill's *My Early Life*," *Journal of Historical Biography* 7 (Spring 2010): 1–29.

work, the biography of his father Lord Randolph Churchill, engaged the fundamental democratization of Victorian politics that followed the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884. *The World Crisis*, the history of the Great War that Churchill composed during the 1920s, confronted the development of “total war” in the context of mass, industrialized society. And the autobiographical memoir *My Early Life*, which Churchill published in 1929, just before he began work on *Marlborough*, recognized the difficulty of leadership amid the “crippled broken world” that had emerged from the Great War.

In much the same way that Churchill used his own life, he now used the life of the first duke of Marlborough, broadening and deepening his analyses of political modernity by retracing its genealogy to the second half of the seventeenth century and to what Steve Pincus has called Europe’s “first modern revolution,” the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689.¹⁶ Three critical developments shaped the stage on which Churchill places the drama of the Duke of Marlborough’s career. First, Churchill makes clear that the stage on which he will have Marlborough act is the post-Westphalian Europe of sovereign states. Gone, or at least largely effaced, are relatively stable supranational dynastic or universal confessional loyalties. In their place is a secular dynamism of *power*, which individual states now moved to monopolize within a contiguous territory and maximize amid ever-shifting competitions and alliances with other states. Thus in the Nine Years War that broke out in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, Protestant England and the United Provinces were formally allied with Catholic Spain and the Catholic Empire. Even more tellingly, these Protestant powers had the tacit support of Pope Innocent XI, who opposed Louis XIV’s aspirations to spiritual authority over the Gallican Church. Indeed, Churchill notes, “to [Innocent] more than to any other individual we owe the fact that the wars of William and . . . of Marlborough were, for Europe at large, secular struggles for worldly dominion, and that the lines of battle were no longer, as in preceding generations, the lines of faith.” Later, too, Churchill adds that in the armies of the Grand Alliance, Catholics and Anglicans, Dutch Calvinists and German Lutherans, English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians all served with “unquestioning comradeship” against the common foe, Louis XIV.¹⁷

Second, Churchill recognizes that, on the stage on which he has Marlborough act, success in international competition depended on new fiscal

¹⁶ Steve Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ I:240 and II:601.

and military techniques. A necessary condition for the ability of William III or Anne to sustain a quarter century of nearly continuous warfare was the Financial Revolution of the 1690s and the rise of public credit. As J. G. A. Pocock has shown, the rise of public credit had momentous consequences for the intellectual history of the Duke of Marlborough's times. If, in traditional political thought, fixed property was the material anchor for the rational actor, the rise of mobile property entailed new "modes of consciousness suited to a world of moving objects." What now sustained government, in short, was the investor's imagination and speculative projections.¹⁸

Likewise, in military techniques, the Duke of Marlborough would inhabit, and play a critical role in defining, a similar world of moving objects. To be sure, Churchill has the Duke of Marlborough anticipate the modernity of the Great War: a critical element in his tactical success is the mastery of the firepower of massed infantry. But even more critical to Marlborough's success is the fact that he replaced a "sedate" seventeenth-century warfare of siege and maneuver with a preference for speed and engagement. Again and again, Churchill portrays the startling suddenness with which Marlborough's armies arrive on the field of battle or overwhelm a weakened position. And, again and again, Churchill makes clear that military technique relies, much like public credit, on the manipulation of the imagination. Not only did Marlborough use the element of surprise to confuse the generals of Louis XIV, he used it to undercut the morale of the French rank and file.

The drama of Marlborough's career will also have to contend with a third critical development. Marlborough acted not only on an international stage as a diplomat in the Grand Alliance or a general in the wars of Louis XIV, he also acted on the stage of domestic English politics. Here, too, we encounter a world of objects in motion. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Churchill pointed out, "the English Press began to present itself for the first time as a definite, permanent factor in affairs." The number of newspapers and journals proliferated with the expiration of the Licensing Act in 1695. They "passed from hand to hand in coffee houses" with increasing rapidity, "and post boys carried them to lonely halls and vicarages throughout the country."¹⁹ As they did so, the very nature of the "news," and what John Sommerville called the culture of periodicity, moved to the foreground an ever-transitory secular Present, further contributing to that erosion of the

¹⁸ J. G. A. Pocock, "The Mobility of Property and the Rise of Eighteenth-Century Sociology," in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 103–23.

¹⁹ II:183.

Eternal, that loss of a theological framework, that John Dunn identified.²⁰ At the same time, the circulation of news formed that bourgeois public sphere and public opinion that became a model for how human practical reason, shorn of theological moorings, might provide not only a new order of convivial exchange and refined civility but also the foundation for that confidence that ultimately animated public credit.

The Duke of Marlborough, Churchill wrote, lived in “an age in which all foundations quaked.”²¹ In a post-Westphalian Europe, power had become a function of objects in motion and politics a game of moves and countermoves. The statesman was subject not only to the “fickleness” of the prevailing winds upon which William of Orange had had to rely when he crossed the Channel in 1688, or the new and powerful currents of public opinion, but also to the “infinite caprice” of uncertainties and unknowables.²² Late in his career the Duke of Marlborough summarized the “ferocity” of his times in a letter to his wife, Sarah. “We live,” the duke wrote, “amid tigers and wolves.”²³ But Churchill has violent and chaotic times shadow even the very first acts of his ancestor’s life. John Churchill was born at Ashe House, the Devonshire home of his maternal grandmother, Lady Eleanor Drake. Lady Drake was a “resolute Puritan,” and in 1644, amid the English Civil War, Ashe House was attacked and partly gutted by troops loyal to Charles I. Nonetheless, Lady Drake’s daughter Elizabeth had married Winston Churchill, a Royalist cavalry officer of modest means. Fined by the Parliamentarians after their victory, this seventeenth-century Winston Churchill had been forced to move his family into Ashe House. Thus the young John Churchill had lived his first ten years in “a queer and difficult home” among a family that “war had divided against itself” and in which it was critical to have “friends and connexions on both sides of a public quarrel.” Here, in short, the author of *Marlborough* has John Churchill begin to “make and remake” himself, acquiring the courtier’s grace and easy conversability by which he would make his way through the mysterious “labyrinth” of a similarly divided Europe and England.²⁴

²⁰ See C. John Sommerville, *The News Revolution in England: Cultural Dynamics of Daily Information* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and more recently Tony Claydon, “Daily News and the Construction of Time in Late Stuart England,” *Journal of British Studies* 52 (Jan. 2013): 55–78, who sees the late Stuart press producing a more “fractured” than uniformly modern time consciousness.

²¹ I:350.

²² II:653; I:363.

²³ II:720.

²⁴ I:22–38. For the image of the labyrinth, see, for example, I:331, 451. Churchill devoted his first chapter to Ashe House. Roy Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,



One reason that Winston Churchill's biography grew to four long volumes was the challenge of evoking the "pervasive mutability" of the stage on which Marlborough performed. And on this stage Churchill had the additional challenge of introducing the impressive cast of characters with whom the duke interacted. Churchill used this cast of characters to embody alternative approaches to a new "world of objects in motion." In effect he choreographed around the Duke of Marlborough concentric circles of ideal types.

Of course, the "supreme fact" of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was the French monarch, Louis XIV. For Churchill, Louis XIV's response to pervasive mutability was to try to build an "all powerful, all grasping" mechanism of total control. Not only was the share of the French nobility in effective governance further reduced, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 extinguished the remnants of religious toleration. And with a precociously professionalized administration and military Louis XIV strove to extend the French model of centralized absolutism to the rest of Europe. His "was the most magnificent claim to world dominion," Churchill, the reader of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, concluded, "ever made since the age of the Antonines."²⁵ But in the new secular world of post-Westphalian Europe, there were also other possibilities. From northern Europe came Charles XII of Sweden, who sought to master the "torrents" of the times by the charismatic force of his personality, while the decentralized commercial republic of Grand Pensionary Anton Hensius's United Provinces labored to keep the "dark tempestuous ocean" of violence and chaos safely behind its dikes.²⁶

Initially on the margins of these great developments was "little England." Here, too, Churchill placed the Duke of Marlborough amid an array of ideal-typical responses to mutability. Under the Stuarts, the pull of France prevailed, be it under the jovial latitudinarianism of Charles II or the prerogative power of James II. With the Glorious Revolution, of course, England joined with the United Provinces in a Grand Alliance against Louis XIV, be it now under the encompassing vision of William III's "European view" or

2001), 450–51, comments that this "boring" chapter "sits surlily at the entrance" to Churchill's *Marlborough*. Jenkins speculates that Churchill permitted this bad beginning "to let Ashley establish the quality of his research." I am arguing that this chapter played a central role in establishing the "pervasive mutability" of the modern world in which Marlborough would make his way.

²⁵ For Churchill on Louis XIV's ambitions, see (among many passages) I:65–67 and 226–29 and II:472 and 485.

²⁶ For Charles XII of Sweden, see especially I:632–34; for the United Provinces, see especially I:512–14 on the "republic of the dykes."

under the simple patriotism of Anne's more insular attachments. Further complicating the cast of characters, and the alternative responses to a world of objects in motion, was the emergence of party politics in late seventeenth-century England. The Whigs, for all that their constituencies of Dissenting merchants and financiers flirted with atheism and republicanism, were led by the proud Lords of the Junto, "convinced that they had the secret of British greatness and British freedom in their keeping."²⁷ The Tories, for all that their constituencies of country gentlemen remained sentimentally attached to infeasible hereditary succession and High Church principles, were led by Robert Harley and Henry St. John, masters of malice and mendacity. And into the Duke of Marlborough's immediate circle this play of alternatives continued: his wife Sarah Jennings responded to the violent and chaotic times with irrepressible passion while his unfailing ally the lord treasurer Sidney Godolphin was ever the sober civil servant.

One of Churchill's points in assembling such an extensive cast of characters is to present the sheer variety of innovation in the political life of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. But he also wants to show that each of these ideal-typical varieties falls short. In scene after scene, Churchill has the actors with whom he surrounds the Duke of Marlborough make tragic exits. In the wake of the battle of Oudenarde in 1708 and the great famine of spring 1709, for example, Louis XIV must confront the wreck of his ambitions: "despair and remorse swelled in upon him in a dark flood" and, in the midst of his ministers, the Great King collapses in tears.²⁸ The same year the long string of military successes that had characterized Charles XII of Sweden's "charmed life" was "irretrievably ruined" by an "impetuous miscalculation" at the battle of Poltava.²⁹ Conversely, in 1705, when the Duke of Marlborough, in full flush of the victory at Blenheim, was poised to deliver what might have been the decisive blow to the French army in Flanders, the Dutch refused to gamble. "The Dutch," Churchill noted poignantly, "wore out Fortune with their sluggish precautions."³⁰

Churchill has similar tragic exits unfold in England. The zealous James II endeavors to plunge England into anarchy as he throws the Great Seal into the Thames, orders the army to disband, and steals away in the night for

²⁷ I:696.

²⁸ II:485, 532.

²⁹ I:633; II:581.

³⁰ I:979

Louis XIV's France. Charles II, who "knew better than anyone the awful dangers which James's character and religion would bring upon the land," sired a troop of bastards but no legitimate heir and, with cordial acquiescence, "left the baffling problems of the future to solve themselves."³¹ Never able to overcome his contempt for the protracted wranglings of English party politics, William III died more isolated than James II.³² Anne, the early years of whose reign were as "glorious in the history of the British Empire as those of Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria," lived just long enough to have jeopardized, through her prejudices and pettiness, these achievements and to have made her reign "odious and contemptible."³³ In 1710, the members of the Whig ministry were picked off one by one as Harley played on their individual ambitions and personal jealousies and divided them from each other by flattery and false hopes. In 1714, Harley, in turn, was outmaneuvered by St. John, who was so much the creature of the degenerate game of English politics that now that the moment had come to restore the Stuarts he had "neither the soul to decide nor the manhood to dare."³⁴ In Marlborough's circle, Godolphin falls because, in his efforts to remain in power and support the war, he quarrels with no one. Sarah falls because she quarrels with everyone.

"Everything is relative," Churchill declared when reflecting on the methodological problems of understanding his seventeenth-century subject. The past cannot be "painted in bold blacks and whites." Churchill would like us to understand much the same point about the actors—the embodied ideal types—with whom he surrounds the Duke of Marlborough. In each case, Churchill has these actors deal in "bold blacks and whites." By contrast, Churchill gives us a Duke of Marlborough who, like the good historian, was more capable of dealing in "greys shading indefinably, mysteriously, in and out of one another."³⁵ Churchill's duke has traces of both the cavalier sensibility of Charles II and the commanding obstinacy of James II. He alternates, like William III and Anne, between the sublimity of a providential calling and the mundane tranquility of domestic life. He may assume the high pride of the Lords of the Junto. But, with Harley and St. John, he may also deal in deceit.

³¹ I:270 on James II; I:176–77 on Charles II.

³² I:300–301.

³³ For Churchill's differing views of Anne, compare, for example, I:504–9 with II:652–54 or 1012, where Churchill even urges his readers to rejoice at Anne's passing.

³⁴ II:1012.

³⁵ I:310, 321. Cf. Kenneth W. Thompson, *Winston Churchill's World View: Statesmanship and Power* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 44–45, who similarly has Churchill deal in the gray colors of a political universe no longer characterized by a shared morality.

In sum, Churchill constructs his Duke of Marlborough on the model of George Saville, marquess of Halifax's "character of a trimmer." "This innocent word Trimmer," Halifax wrote, cheekily exploiting contemporary usage, "signifieth no more than this, that if men are together in a Boat, and one part of the Company would weigh it down on one side, [and] another would make it lean as much to the contrary, it happeneth there is a third Opinion of those who conceave it would do as well, if the Boat went even without endangering the passengers."³⁶ Until we have another mankind, Halifax observed, there will always be "fresh Gales," and so the stability of the ship of state will always depend on a Polybian practice of counterbalancing. Thus it is "the Composite" of wise mixtures that provides the best policy, and it is "by mutual agitation, from the several parts, that the whole frame, instead of being torn . . . comes to be . . . closer knit, by being thus exercised." For Halifax, nowhere was this "Composite" better exercised than where Monarchy and Parliament moderate their respective tendencies to "devouring prerogative" and "litigious ungovernable Freedom."³⁷

The Duke of Marlborough, Churchill argued with tacit approval, "certainly learned politics from Halifax." "Step by step he turned away from the extremes of either party and followed the sane reasonable course of the illustrious Trimmer."³⁸ Like Halifax, the Duke of Marlborough was always conscious that "there are no clear-cut solutions"—"such perfection was not of this world."³⁹ Like Halifax, the Duke of Marlborough was always content with the actual living mean of an imperfect but improvable English constitution. And to ensure that the boat "went even," the Duke of Marlborough, like Halifax again, steered his way among the divided loyalties, the conflicting interests, and criss-cross ties of his times, "turning from side to side, faction to faction," picking and choosing among "fluctuating values."⁴⁰

In foreign affairs, too, there was a harmony between Marlborough and Halifax. If Halifax, or Marlborough, ever "cometh somewhat neere" to "Idolatry," it was only in the "divinitie" they attached to the interests of England, and if Polybian practice again mandated that overweening ambition could be

³⁶ "The Character of a Trimmer," in *The Works of George Savile Marquis of Halifax*, ed. Mark N. Brown (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 179.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 194–95.

³⁸ I:173–74.

³⁹ II:191 and "Character of a Trimmer," 184.

⁴⁰ I:173–74, 298. A particularly good example of Churchillian trimming is Marlborough's role in the debate on the Occasional Conformity Bill in 1704, on which see, for example, I:704.

checked only by countervailing power, there was again a trimming exercise of that power.⁴¹ Thus Churchill has the same refusal to deal in “blacks and whites” and to become captive to “fixed opinions” that we have seen in the Duke of Marlborough’s approach to insular English politics characterize the duke’s approach to war and diplomacy. No less than Louis XIV, the Duke of Marlborough could deal in grand strategy. Churchill repeatedly describes his ancestor’s “guiding hand,” “comprehensive view,” “Imperial” vision, and “far-reaching conception.” He saw “the war as a whole,” wrote Churchill. The Duke of Marlborough “thought for all, he acted for all.”⁴² At the same time, the duke calculated his interests as cautiously as the Dutch. He was a master of detail. He insisted on personally reconnoitering the field of battle and he managed the army’s money with the shabby scrupulosity of “a cheese-paring Treasury clerk.”⁴³ To a Churchill, whose own financial profligacy was notorious, the first duke’s “meanness” was clearly a family anomaly. Yet these habits of petty personal economy, Churchill acknowledges, were the foundation for his heroic virtues and martial daring. “They arose from the same methodical, patient, matter-of-fact spade-work which characterizes all his conduct of war, and formed the only basis upon which the great actions for which he is renowned could have sprung.”⁴⁴ Nowhere is the combination of daring conception and cautious calculation clearer than in the unfolding of the campaign that culminated in the battle of Blenheim. Staking all, the Duke of Marlborough exposed the United Provinces, leading his army out of Flanders to Bavaria in order to bolster the tottering edifice of the empire. Leaving nothing to chance, the Duke of Marlborough choreographed every step of the provisioning of his army, while weaving a meticulous web of misdirection to keep the French army in suspense.

Statesmanship, Churchill concludes, cannot, like traditional forms of political philosophy, deal in absolutes.⁴⁵ It must deal with “the actual facts” and the practical mastery of countervailing forces. In short, a world in motion requires statesmanship to be a mobile capacity. This understanding of statesmanship accounts for what Churchill calls “the mystery” of the Duke of Marlborough’s “system” and for the paradoxical character of his virtues. In Churchill’s presentation, the Duke of Marlborough can be a remote figure

⁴¹ “Character of a Trimmer,” 231–39.

⁴² I:15, II:114, I:414, II:352, and I:488–89.

⁴³ I:656.

⁴⁴ I:423.

⁴⁵ II:193.

of glamour. He is the Captain General of the English army, commander in chief of the armies of the Grand Alliance, Extraordinary Ambassador, and prince of the empire. But he is also the common soldier's "Corporal John," who, like Charles XII of Sweden, rushes with a frenzy into the thick of battle. In much the same way, Churchill presents a Duke of Marlborough who is "resigned" but "resolute," "principled" but "ruthless," "obstinate" but "flexible," "spontaneous" but "dissimulating," "avaricious" but "generous," and "serene" but "spirited." Above all, the Duke of Marlborough combines the audacity of his passionate duchess Sarah with the steadfastness of his cherished friend Godolphin. Twice, once at the end of volume II and again at the end of volume III, Churchill pauses to reflect on this "extraordinary quality" of his subject.⁴⁶ The Duke of Marlborough's mind, Churchill writes, was "a weighing machine for practical affairs." It used audacity or daring and prudence or circumspection "as if they were tools to be picked up or laid down according to the job." There were occasions when the duke was overly daring. More often he was overly prudent, and "if he had given way to the general ardour around him, he might have had a greater success." But, in ten years of war, he was never immobilized, never "entrapped."



No one reading the four volumes of *Marlborough* that Churchill published between 1933 and 1938 can avoid the analogies that the author repeatedly invites between his own times and the duke's violent and chaotic times. Paul Alkon, in his study of the role of the imagination in Churchill's writings, describes "the double temporal framework" in which Churchill embeds his biography.⁴⁷ Churchill, Alkon explains, encourages his readers both to view past events from the perspective of future consequences and to view contemporary events from the perspective of the myriad contingencies of his unfolding narrative. To take the most obvious example, when Churchill insists with ever-mounting rhetorical intensity that Louis XIV aimed at the extinction of the liberties of Christendom and the establishment of a "totalitarian monarchy" that aspired to European and even to world hegemony, who among his audience would not have recognized that the contemporary fact of Adolf Hitler was shaping the presentation of the past even as that presentation was shaping the perception of the increasing belligerence of

⁴⁶ I:955 and II:471.

⁴⁷ Paul K. Alkon, *Winston Churchill's Imagination* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2006), 178.

the Nazi regime?⁴⁸ And, as if to leave no doubt of his intentions, Churchill remarks near the end of the fourth volume that the menace that Marlborough's generation faced in France, his generation now recognizes in an overweening Germany.⁴⁹

Indeed, as Tuvia Ben-Moshe has pointed out, *Marlborough* played an important role in contemporary strategic debates.⁵⁰ During the 1930s, the strategic doctrine of the Conservative Party leadership, in particular of Neville Chamberlain and his secretary of state for war, Leslie Hore-Belisha, closely followed the lead of the military historian and theorist B. H. Liddell-Hart. At the same time as Churchill was working on *Marlborough*, Liddell-Hart published a series of books—*The British Way of Warfare* (1932), *Europe in Arms* (1937), and *The Defense of Britain* (1939)—all of which advocated a defense policy that relied on air and sea power and avoided land engagements. The double temporal framework of *Marlborough* proceeded in very much the opposite direction, making the case that British armies had been historically essential to the maintenance of the balance of power in Europe and that the contemporary security of Britain would continue to require continental commitments.

Churchill also uses the double temporal framework of *Marlborough*, as Alkon emphasizes, to enlist readers into participation by asking them to imagine the outcomes of other choices.⁵¹ Initially Churchill asks his readers to consider only alternative pasts. Did William III blunder in 1689 by dividing his limited forces between Ireland and the continent? Did Louis XIV miss the best chance for a Stuart restoration by rejecting James's proposal for an invasion of England in 1690? But increasingly Churchill's counterfactuals also work in a double temporal framework. Thus, for example, Churchill builds into his account of the peace negotiations of 1709 an allegorical reflection on the Treaty of Versailles. An enduring peace might have been possible except for the Whig government's uncompromising insistence on humiliating France through a stipulation that Louis XIV go to war with his grandson Philip of Anjou if he refused to step aside as king of Spain. Instead the Whig government sacrificed the claims of justice on which the Grand Alliance had originally been built. Faced with "subjugation by a victorious coalition," French national spirit rallied, preparing the way for the even "darker war" of

⁴⁸ II:192.

⁴⁹ II:996.

⁵⁰ Tuvia Ben-Moshe, *Churchill: Strategy and History* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 100–112.

⁵¹ See Alkon, *Imagination*, 178–85 on Churchill's use of counterfactuals.

Malplaquet.⁵² Again Churchill makes the appeasement debates of the 1930s the subtext of his account of the Treaties of Utrecht, which in the years 1713–1714 brought the War of Spanish Succession to an end. Here much of what Marlborough had achieved might have been preserved had the Tory peace party, which succeeded the Whig government in 1710, not expediently abandoned its alliance obligations and cut its own deal with France. Instead the failure to achieve definite restrictions of French ambitions meant that “the wars of [Marlborough’s] generation would only be renewed in the future.”⁵³

What lessons did Churchill wish his readers to take from having participated in this double temporal framework and having considered these counterfactuals? In the very last lines of *Marlborough*, Churchill offers one answer. Here Churchill writes, “History may declare that if [the Duke of Marlborough] had had more power his country would have had more strength and happiness, and Europe a surer progress.”⁵⁴ For some commentators, these lines are unambiguous. The Duke of Marlborough had not extricated himself from the trammels of the petty party politics of England or of the collective leadership and particularist institutions of the United Provinces. Marlborough may have “held the whole panorama of Europe in his steady gaze” but, unlike a Napoleon or a Frederick the Great, he never attained that political Archimedean point from which he might have dared to combine his comprehensive vision with the authority to act decisively for the public good.⁵⁵ Put another way, he had had the misfortune of being soldier and statesman but not sovereign.⁵⁶

There is no question that Churchill wished that the Duke of Marlborough had been given more “freedom of action” at critical points in the War of Spanish Succession, above all in Flanders in the aftermath of the battle of Blenheim. Since Churchill had organized much of the six volumes of *The World Crisis* that he published between 1923 and 1931 around a justification

⁵² II:558 and more generally chaps. 5 and 6 in volume IV, “The Lost Peace” and “Darker War.”

⁵³ II:995.

⁵⁴ II:1040.

⁵⁵ II:20. Frisch, “Intentions of Churchill’s *Marlborough*,” 571–72, and Frisch, review of the University of Chicago edition of *Marlborough*, 191–92, emphasize the discrepancy between thought and action in Marlborough’s last years. Both pieces focus exclusively on Marlborough’s failure in the peace negotiations of 1709. It was, however, part of Churchill’s point not to overweigh either side of the boat, and he is at least as dismayed by the failures of the Treaties of Utrecht as he is by the failure of the peace negotiations of 1709.

⁵⁶ For this interpretation of Marlborough, see, for example, Algis Valiunas, *Churchill’s Military Histories: A Rhetorical Study* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 75, 86, 88.

of his 1915 Gallipoli strategy and an account of its inadequate implementation, no reader should be surprised to find him lamenting the “unfought Waterloo” of August 1705. Yet however much Churchill was attached to the ironies of history, or however much his presentation of Marlborough’s career might have served to exonerate his own decisions, it was scarcely his purpose to derive from Marlborough’s defense of British liberty a contemporary case for authoritarian leadership.

Here we can usefully recall that Churchill had the Duke of Marlborough’s political catechism be the “Character of a Trimmer”—a work that questioned both reason’s inclination to absolutes and the will’s inclination to arbitrariness.⁵⁷ “There is a wantonness in too great Power,” Halifax had written, and a wise leader “would chose to govern by rules for his own Sake, as well as for his people’s, since it only secureth him from Errours, and does not lessen the real authority that a good magistrate would care to be possessed of.”⁵⁸ Churchill’s assessment of Marlborough makes a similar point. The duke’s greatness lies in the fact that, however immodest his personal avarice, in his political and military career he was content to be a servant subject to law.⁵⁹ Likewise the Duke of Marlborough’s genius was not that of a godlike Olympian standing above and apart from “lesser men” or “smaller minds.” Rather, the Duke of Marlborough’s genius lay in collective management. His “personal apparatus” of exceptional staff, and his partnership of equals with Prince Eugene of Savoy, Churchill repeatedly points out, were essential to his unbroken series of victories. In the end it was the fact that Louis XIV had concentrated authority that explains the ineffectualness of the French commanders: made creatures of courtly preference, they were strategically and tactically cautious, wedded to fixed opinions, and lacking in imagination and initiative. By contrast, precisely because the Duke of Marlborough had to work within a political context in which Parliament was master of the money and in which royal administration was giving way to party administration, he could not afford to be beaten. Put simply, there was an elective affinity between an understanding of statesmanship as a mobile capacity and the very liberties that the development of the British constitution had made possible.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Oddly, the few commentators who do rightly discern the biography’s significance for political philosophy wrongly ignore the importance that Churchill assigns Halifax. A partial exception is Muller, “A ‘Good Englishman’: Politics and War in Churchill’s Life of Marlborough,” *Political Science Reviewer* 18 (1988): 98, 105.

⁵⁸ “Character of a Trimmer,” 187.

⁵⁹ I:741

⁶⁰ II:19.

Churchill, then, may take Marlborough to task for his growing cautiousness, but he did not believe that the “power” that the Duke of Marlborough required to provide England greater strength and happiness and Europe a surer progress was an expansive freedom of action by which a philosopher-king or a charismatic leader might negate politics. Rather, the “power” that Marlborough “had not” was fundamentally what Churchill called in *My Early Life* “structures of self-confidence”—the courageous character, the poetic self-fashioning, the inclusive rhetoric, and the epistemological modesty by which to navigate the new openness and mobility of modern politics.⁶¹ To put the point as baldly as possible, the Duke of Marlborough failed British institutions. British institutions did not fail the Duke of Marlborough.

A common method, Churchill reminds his readers midway through the final volume of *Marlborough*, underlay the duke’s military successes. Battle “comprised an aggressive dominant of the first order.” Typically British redcoats would unleash a “hideous violence” somewhere on the enemy’s flanks, which, when the enemy countered, would be followed by an opportunist onslaught elsewhere along the front.⁶² What the Duke of Marlborough did so well on the battlefield, however, he gradually did less well in the conflicts of British politics. From the opening pages of volume III, the blemishes on Churchill’s portrait of Marlborough shift from his incidental romantic and pecuniary foibles toward matters of character and judgment. Now the Marlborough who had defied all military convention “yearned for praise” and craved appreciation.⁶³ Now the Marlborough who had always carefully guarded a reserve of surplus troops to preserve the initiative found himself, for lack of his own parliamentary group, isolated and without options in British political life. And now the Marlborough whose military successes turned on taking the offensive abandoned any attempt to make his case with public opinion and retreated into silence before his critics. Symbolic of these failures in Marlborough’s structures of self-confidence is the double meaning of “Blenheim.” While the battle had been a masterpiece of mobility, the palace had become a monument, and its immobile masses of masonry and the prodigious costs of construction now left the duke exposed to the mockery and the censure of the press and to the envy and hostility of his ministerial colleagues.⁶⁴

⁶¹ On “structures of self-confidence,” see Sullivan, “Disenchanted Whiggism,” 15–20.

⁶² I:799.

⁶³ II:24.

⁶⁴ II:754.



Some commentators still puzzle over why Churchill set his biography of the Duke of Marlborough within a historiographical debate with the nineteenth-century Whig historian Thomas Babington Macaulay.⁶⁵ Far from being an idiosyncratic incidental, Churchill's engagement with Macaulay shows an awareness of the historiographical debates of the interwar years and their political-cultural significance. The years of *Marlborough's* composition corresponded to the centenary of the Great Reform Act and the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Glorious Revolution, and a celebration of England's constitutional achievement appealed to a generation that had passed through the Great War only to find much of continental Europe succumbing to authoritarianism.⁶⁶

This "efflorescence of inter-war Whig history" did not go unchallenged, however. Thus, to take the most obvious example, Herbert Butterfield published the essay *The Whig Interpretation of History* in 1931. The fundamental fallacy into which much Whig history falls, Butterfield famously charged, is an abridgment by which the present is the measure of the past and in which progress is no more than a simple, ineluctable process of the realization, and ratification, of the rightness of that present. The historian, Butterfield vigorously maintained, must understand the past for the sake of the past, eschewing all moral judgments, and instead elucidate in detail the devious tracks and strange conjunctures by which our past became our present.⁶⁷

Churchill's *Marlborough* certainly shares with *The Whig Interpretation of History* the commitment to the pastness of the past. Churchill is perhaps even harsher than Butterfield in mocking historians who, secure in their purity and virtue, fail to understand imaginatively that standards of conduct and morals change with the age.⁶⁸ Likewise Churchill's *Marlborough* certainly shares with *The Whig Interpretation of History* a sense of the complexity of the historical process: as we saw in the second section of this essay, Churchill gives the duke the character of a trimmer among myriad competing forces. But Churchill refused the simple formism of *The Whig Interpretation of History*.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ For example, Clarke, *Churchill's Profession*, 163–65, 176–77.

⁶⁶ This context is well developed in David Cannadine, "Piety: Josiah Wedgewood and the History of Parliament," in *Churchill's Shadow*, 134–58.

⁶⁷ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: Norton, 1965 [1931]). Another notable challenge to the Whig interpretation of history came from Lewis Namier.

⁶⁸ I:40, 375.

⁶⁹ In thinking about Churchill as a historical writer it can still be useful to return to Hayden White,

This formism left Butterfield without intellectual resources to offer historical judgments on Hitler and Nazism—a result that even his most sympathetic biographer called a historiographical version of appeasement.⁷⁰ Instead, as we have just seen, Churchill's *Marlborough* exploits analogies both to discern an enduring value of the English past and, at the same time, to shape an understanding of contemporary possibilities.

What *Marlborough*'s moments of Rankean formism did was to counter ironically another political danger that Churchill discerned closer to home in Macaulay's version of the Whig interpretation of history. Macaulay wished to assign the limits that Malborough at the beginning of his career had rejected. He wished, Churchill charged, to separate the Whig ideal from the hard choices and "rough work" that made the ideal possible. "The event [for Macaulay] is glorious: the instrument dishonoured. The end was indispensable to British freedom: the means . . . disgraceful."⁷¹ In the 1930s, Churchill understood, and most particularly with the rise of Nazi Germany, that such a tendency to "assign limits" was a powerful temptation to a generation that had already suffered the losses of 1914–1918. Churchill also understood that such a tendency was working to evade responsibility and leave the Whig ideal defenseless.⁷² Thus Macaulay's grand nephew and putative last Whig historian, G. M. Trevelyan, who plausibly was a target of Butterfield's polemic, himself retreated into an increasingly apolitical pessimism throughout the 1930s.⁷³

Churchill's *Marlborough*, we can conclude, offered a very different disenchanting Whiggism. Yes, amid the dizzy whirlpool of moving forces, there were tragic potentialities everywhere, and no assurance from design anywhere. Yet precisely this disenchantment meant that a comic resolution was still possible with the character of a trimmer and with robust structures of self-confidence. *Marlborough* thus ends in a particularly striking irony: the duke succumbed

Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). On formism, see 13–15.

⁷⁰ C. T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 107. Churchill's complex position helps explain how Clarke, in *Churchill's Profession*, 172–74, can present the author of *Marlborough* as both in agreement with the "anti-Whig" Namier and yet capable of being understood by the socialist George Bernard Shaw as a "covert Whig."

⁷¹ I:270.

⁷² Muller, "Good Englishman," 103, expresses the general point well: a modern morality centered more on intentions than effects "is too critical of the man who makes practical choices in circumstances less than fully choiceworthy, as circumstances always are, and too friendly to the man who refrains from taking any part in practical choices lest he find himself required to take responsibility."

⁷³ Victor Feske, *Belloc to Churchill: Private Scholars, Public Culture, and the Crisis of British Liberalism, 1900–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 189, 221–23.

to that very same “sombre fatalism” that the Whiggish history of his nemesis Macaulay later came to encourage.⁷⁴ By contrast, the Churchill who wrote *Marlborough* spurned “appreciation” for the wilderness. And in the wilderness he would never give in to political indifference and, however much his Conservative colleagues might have wished otherwise, he would never keep silent. With some success, then, Churchill resisted the temptations of private withdrawal. He remained committed to the vocation of politics, always remembering that among a free people—to quote another trimmer, Max Weber—politics is “the strong and slow boring of hard boards.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ II:285–86.

⁷⁵ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 128.