VINTAGE

# Harold Nicolson

Norman Rose

## CONTENTS

# About the Book

Harold Nicolson was a man of extraordinary gifts. A renowned politician, historian, biographer, diarist, novelist, lecturer, journalist, broadcaster and gardener, his position in society and politics allowed him an insight into the most dramatic events of British, indeed world, history.

Nicolson's personal life was no less dramatic. Married to Vita Sackville-West, one of the most famous writers of her day, their marriage survived, even prospered, despite their both being practising homosexuals. Unashamedly elitist, bound together by their literary, social, and intellectual pursuits, moving in the refined circles of the Bloomsbury group they viewed life from the rarified peaks of aristocratic haughtiness.

Few men could boast such gifts as Nicolson possessed, yet he ended his life plagued by self-doubt. 'I am attempting nothing; therefore I cannot fail,' he once acknowledged. What went wrong? It was a question that haunted Nicolson throughout his adult life. Relying on a wealth of archival material, Norman Rose brilliantly disentangles fact from fiction, setting Nicolson's story of perceived failure against the wider perspective of his times.

# About the Author

Norman Rose is a graduate of the LSE and now holds the Chair of International Relations at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. A distinguished historian and Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, he is also the author of much acclaimed biographies of Winston Churchill and Chaim Weitzman, as well as a study of the Cliveden Set.

# ALSO BY NORMAN ROSE

*The Gentle Zionists*

*'Baffy':*
*The Diaries of Blanche Dugdale*

*Vansittart: Study of a Diplomat*

*Lewis Namier and Zionism*

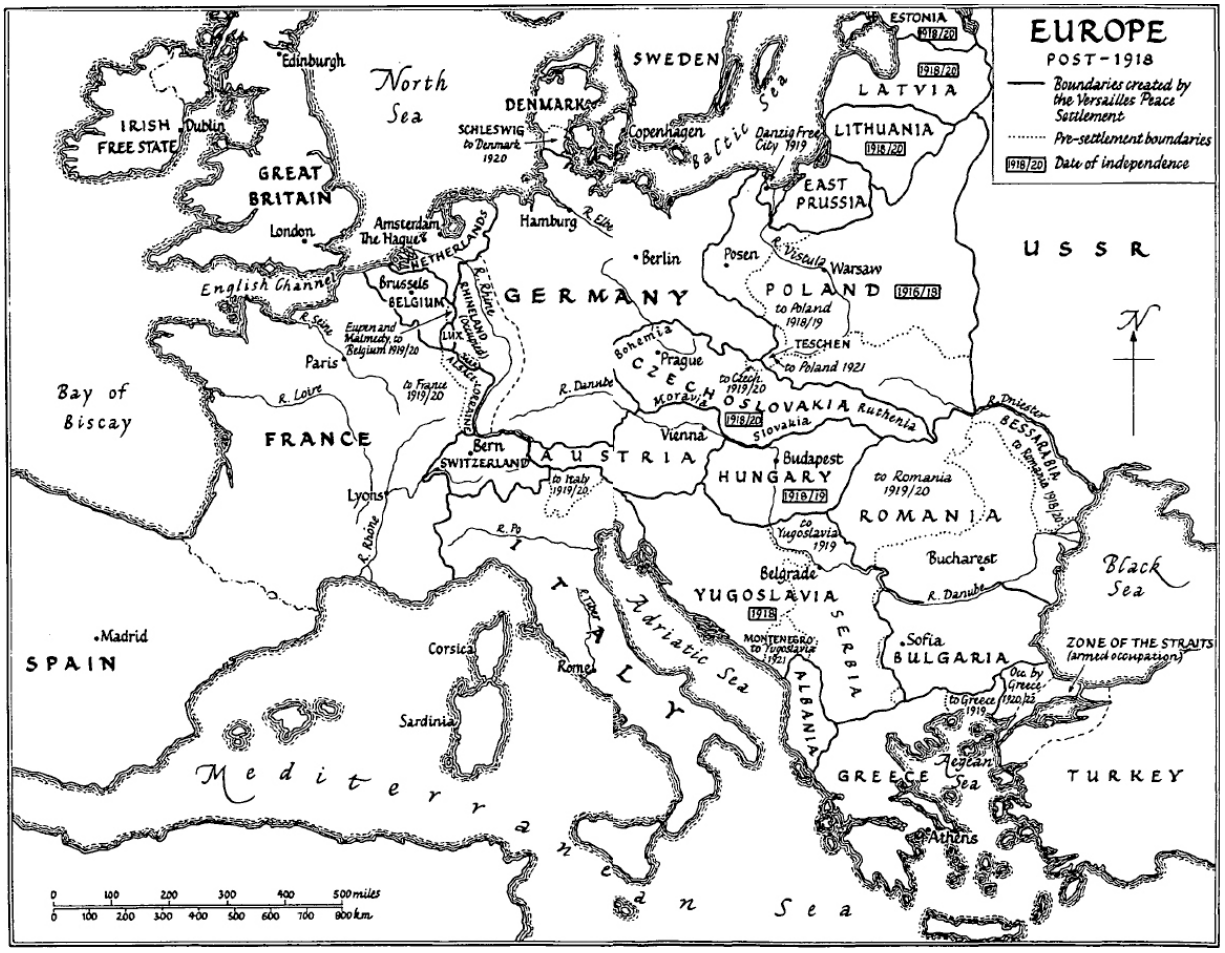
*Chaim Weizmann: A Biography*

*Churchill: An Unruly Life*

*The Cliveden Set:*
*Portrait of an Exclusive Fraternity*

# ILLUSTRATIONS

13. Canvassing in North Croydon, 1948 (*reproduced by kind permission of the Estates of Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West*).
14. Bertrand Russell, Harold Nicolson and Lord Samuel at the BBC before the discussion 'Why defend liberty?' on 24 January 1951 (*BBC*).
15. Vita and Harold in 1959 (*Philip Turner*).
16. Harold with Nigel and grandson Adam in 1962 (*Edwin Smith*).


EUROPE
POST-1918
Boundaries created by the Versailles Peace Settlement
Pre-settlement boundaries
1918/20 Date of independence
North Sea
Baltic Sea
Black Sea
Adriatic Sea
Aegean Sea
Mediterranean Sea
Bay of Biscay
English Channel
IRISH FREE STATE
Dublin
Edinburgh
GREAT BRITAIN
London
Amsterdam
The Hague
NETHERLANDS
Brussels
BELGIUM
Paris
FRANCE
Madrid
SPAIN
Bern
SWITZERLAND
Lyons
Corsica
Sardinia
Rome
ITALY
Berlin
GERMANY
Hamburg
DENMARK
Copenhagen
SCHLESWIG to Denmark 1920
SWEDEN
Danzig Free City 1919
ESTONIA 1918/20
LATVIA 1918/20
LITHUANIA 1918/20
EAST PRUSSIA
Posen
Warsaw
POLAND 1916/18
to Poland 1918/19
TESCHEN
to Poland 1921
USSR
Prague
Bohemia
Moravia
CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1918/20
Slovakia
Ruthenia
Vienna
AUSTRIA
to Italy 1919/20
Budapest
HUNGARY 1918/19
to Romania 1919/20
ROMANIA
BESSARABIA to Romania 1918/20
Bucharest
to Yugoslavia 1919
Belgrade
YUGOSLAVIA 1918
SERBIA
MONTENEGRO to Yugoslavia 1921
ALBANIA
Sofia
BULGARIA
ZONE OF THE STRAITS (armed occupation)
Occ. by Greece 1920/23
to Greece 1919
GREECE
Athens
TURKEY
Eupen and Malmedy to Belgium 1919/20
LUXEMBURG
RHINELAND (Demilitarized)
to France 1919/20
SAAR (Plebiscite 1935)
R. Rhine
R. Danube
R. Loire
R. Seine
R. Po
R. Vistula
R. Dniester
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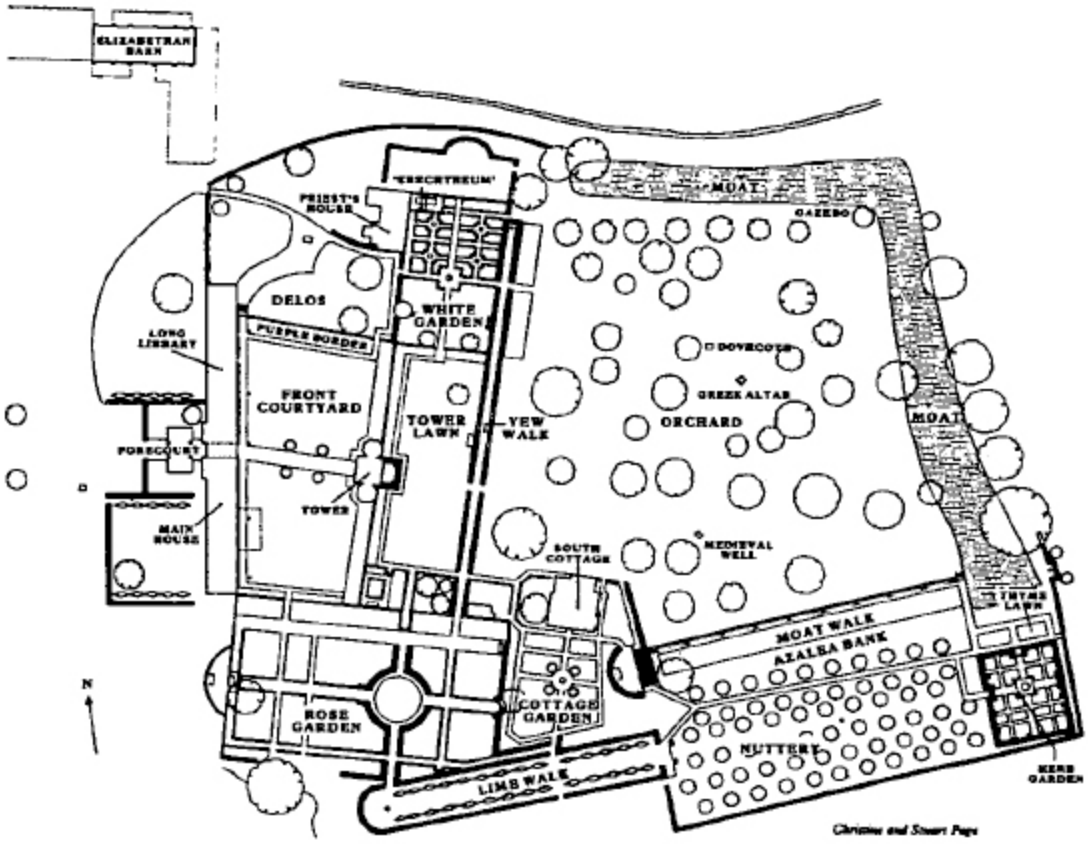
## SISSINGHURST HOUSE AND GARDEN



For My Mother

# HAROLD NICOLSON

NORMAN ROSE

PIMLICO

# ONE

## *‘Silver Spoons’*

How extraordinary, it was said of the Hon. Harold George Nicolson – Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order, Commander of Legion of Honour, Companion of St Michael and St George, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Governor of the BBC, Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, President of the Classical Association, and member of the Boards of the National Trust, the London Library and the National Portrait Gallery – ‘to be born with your mouth full of silver spoons’.[1]

Harold would not have disagreed, although he might not have put it so bluntly. His earliest memories were of the sumptuous legations or embassies, presided over by his father or his most illustrious relative, the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, and of the great country houses of County Down, Ireland, patrimony of his mother’s kinsfolk.

He recalled:

> At breakfast, each of the three footmen wore powdered suits. My eyes wandered upwards from their buckled shoes, their silk stockings, their velvet breeches, to the frontage of their upper vesture. Enraptured – my gaze fixed itself upon their heads. The hair of each of them had that morning been drenched in oil; upon the agglutinated foundation thus achieved some early-rising hairdresser had puffed, sprinkled or thrown a preparation of

> powdered chalk. He had then, with a wide-pronged comb, striated this starched amalgam; parting it ruthlessly on the right side of the head; clawing it backwards above the ears.

Perplexed, the young Harold was at a loss to explain this exotic vision. ‘Mummy,’ he asked, ‘why has this man got white hair?’[2] Bewilderment soon gave way to a distinct penchant for such settings, as these scenes, with slight variations according to place and period, pursued him with pleasing regularity throughout his life.

The British Legation at Tehran, recorded an entranced Gertrude Bell, was housed in a ‘rambling pale stone house, with long hallways, where liveried servants would bow as one passed’. Chancing upon ‘capacious dining rooms, drawing rooms, and billiard rooms, countless sitting rooms and bedrooms for family and guests’, she recalled that ‘everywhere one could smell the scent of roses and hear the sound of nightingales’. As for the grounds, they were akin to ‘the Garden of Eden’. Dotted among the lawns and the trees and the running streams were located the bungalow-like residences of the diplomatic staff.

The Legation was surrounded by the vastness of the desert: ‘miles and miles of it with nothing, *nothing* growing; ringed in with bleak bare mountains snow crowned and furrowed with the deep courses of currents … it is a very wonderful thing to see’. But it was only a short half-hour drive to Gulhek, where the diplomatists would escape from the torrid summer heat of Tehran. ‘Life at Gulhek was almost a dream of delight.’ A little work until about midday, a plunge into the very cold waters of the bathing pool, a glass of sherry, luncheon, an obligatory siesta in the burning heat of the summer afternoon, tea, tennis, and finally an admirable dinner. ‘What could be a more delightful programme.’[3] It was in these relaxed,

civilised surroundings that Harold George Nicolson was born on 21 November 1886, third son to Arthur Nicolson, Secretary to the British Legation, and Mary Catherine Rowan.*

Arthur Nicolson, after a frustrating spell as a naval recruit, had turned to diplomacy. His lineage was ancient. Family lore held that the clan was founded by Norwegian raiders, the Nicols'sens, who, in the twelfth century, established their ascendancy over the Hebrides, in particular over Lewis and Skye. Dominating in particular the promentory of Totternish on Skye, a certain Andrew Nicolson constructed there the mighty stronghold of Scorrybreck. Nothing now remains of Scorrybreck, though the name Nicolson still survives throughout the region. A distant cousin, so it was claimed, fell at Flodden Field in 1513, fighting valiantly for the losing side.[4] In 1570, a branch of the family, now Anglicised as the Nicolsons, moved from Skye to Edinburgh where they established themselves as lawyers, acquiring substantial properties at Carnock and Tillicoultrie, patiently climbing the social ladder. In 1629, John Nicolson, by now a figure of local substance, was rewarded with a baronetcy. Suspected of Jacobite tendencies, several of Nicolson's immediate forebears sought refuge among the Scottish, regiments serving in the Low Countries, living Dutch lives and dying at Breda and Ypres. Though not entirely impoverished, the Nicolsons founded no great fortunes; nor did they rise above the level of provincial dignitaries. However, the baronetcy passed from generation to generation, until, in 1899, Arthur Nicolson succeeded as the eleventh baronet.

Mary Catherine Rowan Hamilton (or Hamilton Rowan), Harold's mother, could boast of far grander aristocratic connections. Irish-based, her kin embraced the Sheridan, the Blackwood and the Hamilton families. Centred in County Down, the expansive estates of Killyleagh, Shanganagh and Clandeboye splendidly upheld their rank

and status. By far the most celebrated of Harold's closest relatives was Uncle Duff, otherwise known as Frederick Temple-Hamilton Blackwood, first Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, one-time Governor-General of Canada, Viceroy of India, Ambassador at St Petersberg, Constantinople, Rome and Paris, and Warden of the Cinque Ports, who had married Mary Catherine's sister; Hariot ('Lal'). In time, Harold developed the deepest of attachments to his family's Irish ancestral homes, relishing the privileges they offered. It was a cocooned existence – and it found nostalgic expression in his subsequent writings. Here, Harold confessed, he felt secure, anchored in a time-honoured past.[5]

Arthur Nicolson remained three years in Tehran, and then moved on to Hungary (as Consul-General), Constantinople (Secretary of Embassy), Bulgaria (Agent and Consul-General), Morocco (Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary), Madrid and St Petersburg (Ambassador), before returning to the Foreign Office in 1910 as Permanent Under-Secretary. Until he reached school age, Harold followed his parents from place to place. Children of the aristocracy customarily regarded their parents from afar. Finding that their mothers and fathers were too preoccupied with their own affairs – whether high-level statecraft or top-drawer socialising – they routinely attached themselves to surrogate figures, invariably enigmatic governesses or eccentric servants – or perhaps both.

Harold was no exception. He would later acknowledge that 'we were always strangers to our parents'.[6] In any case, Arthur Nicolson was a remote figure. An unhappy childhood and the rigours and limitations of his early education 'had rendered him; even for an Englishman, unduly diffident and reserved'. After concluding his training on the HMS *Britannia*, he refused to follow his father's example and pursue a naval career. Did he find the

false camaraderie, the schoolboyish brutality too much for him? No reason is given. At Rugby his fate was no better. Arthur's final report read: 'Your boy has been an absolute failure … We can only hope that he will be less of a failure in after life.' There was no improvement at Brasenose College, where his tutors found him 'indolent, undisciplined and untidy'. Arthur left Oxford without taking his degree.[7]

At home, things were not much better. Arthur encountered ill humour, if not outright animosity at the hands of his parents. His father, Admiral Sir Frederick William Erskine Nicolson, appeared to epitomise the cliché, 'a crusty old sea dog'. Having apparently committed a colossal, though unspecified, 'error of judgment' during the Crimean War, he was virtually axed from the Navy three years later and received no further command. No less controversial was the Admiral's conduct of his personal affairs, at least in the eyes of those who determined the social mores of the age. It was whispered that the circumstances of his second marriage to Augusta Sarah were not such as to 'commend themselves to Osborne'. Harold would later describe her as 'a tart'. Nor could his third marriage have inspired greater respect, for it was no secret that Arthur's second stepmother, Anne, was addicted to the bottle. She disliked Arthur and the Admiral followed suit, only too ready to believe that his youngest son was 'a wastrel' and regarding him with 'disapproval and almost dislike'. The young Harold recalled the air of 'gloom', of overall neglect, that enveloped his grandfather's house at 15, William Street, Knightsbridge. When not interfering 'with the liberty and feelings of his children', the Admiral dined daily at the Travellers' Club – on partridges and champagne – read a French novel a day, and attended meetings of the Thames Conservancy Board, of which he became chairman.

Eventually, Arthur found refuge from the adversities at home in the relative calm of the Foreign Office. A late

starter, it was only after leaving Oxford that he began to apply himself to his studies. Fluent in French and German, he passed out first in the Foreign Office examinations, gaining 772 marks out of a maximum of 930. He entered the Foreign Office in 1870, spent thirty-five years abroad, returned in 1910 as head of the Office, and retired six years later. Effective as a diplomat, Arthur Nicolson subsequently admitted to his youngest son that he 'was not a good head of an office. I am too easy-going. I do so hate rows' – words that Harold would echo time and again when contemplating the vicissitudes of his own public career. Although they were never intimate, Harold always exhibited the greatest respect and affection for his father. Later he came to write a filial biography of Sir Arthur Nicolson, resuscitating in glowing terms the Old Diplomacy as personified by his father, the Old-Style Diplomat who was 'neither imaginative nor intellectual: he was merely intelligent, honest, sensible, high-minded and fair'.[8]

On the other hand, Harold doted on his mother, Catherine ('Katie'). She hovered constantly in the background, often on call to help combat the everyday cares of his young life. During his earliest years he was cared for by his nurse 'Anna, my dear Anna, who was German and had a sewing-machine and used to eat raw bacon on a green plate'.[9] Later, and inevitably, his so-called champion in these matters was his governess. Who was she? In his writings, Harold invariably referred to her as Miss Plimsoll, a habit, for the sake of convenience, retained in the ensuing narrative.* So, the ubiquitous Edith Plimsoll was forever to be found at Harold's elbow, gently, if not always tactfully, monitoring his every move. 'Not so much noise, dears, please, *please*,' Miss Plimsoll would irritatingly entreat her charges; or else she would resort to her 'boatswain's voice', calling her little ones to 'Breakfast' or La-unch'. When at tea she would enquire, 'Sugar dear?' 'Yes please Miss Plimsoll; two.' 'No, not two dear, but you

can have one of those dear little cakes.' You must not screw up your eyes, Harold was told, 'it's an affected habit'. Whereupon Harold would open them wide in what seemed to be 'a meaningless stare'.

Miss Plimsoll was not 'an excellent governess', Harold sadly acknowledged – even though she had taught him the multiplication tables. 'Sums first,' she would intone, 'and then we must do history. The Kings, you know … of England.' What particularly incensed him were her persistent pleas that he embrace visible 'forms of sturdiness' in his day-to-day behaviour. Her constant reproaches produced in him 'a feeling of constant inadequacy', and left Harold ill suited to face his schooldays 'with an ardent smile'. 'The fibres of my own virility, such as they were,' he reflected later, 'were by this process twisted into unnatural shapes.'[10] Were these remarks a belated attempt to fathom the causes of his own sexual preferences as they evolved later in his life?

Was he a nervous child? he asked his mother. Quite the contrary, she replied, 'you were always doing such dangerous things', and she reminded him of the time when he skipped recklessly along the battlements at Walmer Castle. Harold was forward in other ways. Prompted by his Aunt 'Lal', he was placed on a chair, recited a now long-forgotten poem to an audience of girls, and was rewarded with a Kodak camera – sufficient reward apparently to shield his embarrassment. Every evening he said his prayers in English and German (a language no doubt picked up from his 'dear Anna'). And, or so Catherine claimed, he was always saying 'very clever and original things'. One aspect of Harold's behaviour disturbed his parents. He was frightened of the dark: night-times became an ordeal. Only a passing phase, said the family doctor. But it wasn't. Consumed by 'night-fears', he lay awaka 'shaking in the dark', menaced by imaginary 'bears and lions,

burglars and ghosts’. Harold later admitted: ‘I did not get over it.’[11]

A ‘motif of fear’ ran through Harold’s childhood memories, as ‘successive-terrors’ tortured his imagination. His humour could not have improved when he encountered Sir Richard Burton who thrust his dark, bearded face into Harold’s, barking, ‘Hello, little Tehran!’ Harold yelled. He screamed and screamed until Lady Burton, large and benign in a dove-coloured silk frock, appeared to rescue him. The memory of the notorious adventurer’s ‘questing panther eyes’ remained with him for ever ‘as a thrill of terror and delight’. Somewhat less frightening, but no less intimidating, was his encounter with Prince Ferdinand of Bulgaria. ‘A sinister man’, clad in a ‘green Bulgarian uniform, with the stars of many orders strewn across his breast,’ his gloved hands rested menacingly ‘upon the hilt of a cavalry sword’. The occasion for this apparition watching over Harold was the birthday of the future King Boris III, Ferdinand’s son. Sugared buns and walnuts dipped in toffee, however, more than compensated for Ferdinand’s scary presence.[12]

Harold’s most vivid childhood memories centred on his father’s postings abroad. In his young mind, he graded them according to the magnificence of their dining rooms. Starting with the cramped accommodation in Andrassy Street, Budapest – which robbed it ‘of stately ease’ – they included the grander establishments at Constantinople – ‘where the napkins ran in rows like bishops’ mitres … and the soft Bosphorus sunset slid across the white dinner table in slatted shafts of orange and blue’ – and Tangier – where the table, weighed down with exotic flowers, formed ‘a covert among which nestled little silver bowls for sweets … and sugared almonds of all colours, and crystallized cherries’. In Madrid, the embassy was located in a beautiful but inconvenient cardinal’s palace in the Calle Torrijos. A gloomy place, it lacked bathrooms, and the electric light

was apt to flicker on and off. But its dining room, walls hung in scarlet damask and adorned with huge royal portraits, looked out over a cobbled courtyard, from which wafted up the ‘smell of stables mingling, not unpleasantly, with the scent of food’. By the time Harold frequented the palatial splendour of the St Petersburg embassy he was a junior clerk in the Foreign Office.[13]

But nothing could match the glamour of Uncle Duff’s Paris embassy on the fashionable rue du Faubourg St Honoré, as Harold, aged six, remembered it in May 1892. Aunt ‘Lal’, as always ‘detached, slim and stately’, met the Nicolsons at the Gare de l’Est. Attended by two footmen in fawn-coloured greatcoats, they drove in a brougham to the embassy in circuitous fashion, crossing by the Pont au Change and returning by the Concorde so that Harold could see the lights of the bridges spiralling downwards into the shadowy waters of the Seine. On arrival at the embassy, Miss Plimsoll remarked, ‘it is like a *palace*, dear, isn’t it?’ Edith Plimsoll was nearer to the mark than she knew, for at one time it had been the residence of Pauline Borghese, the flirtatious and scandal-ridden younger sister of the great Napoleon. This made little impression on Harold. When shown Pauline’s bed, he thought it ‘nothing more than a heap of stuff’. But the black and white marble pavement of the great hall, the ornate, sweeping staircase, the magnificent ballroom, the two separate dining rooms, one for small, intimate dinners, the other a spacious room that could hold up to fifty diners, were quite another thing. And always, hovering discreetly in the background, a continuous procession of finely dressed servants. These colourful impressions stuck in Harold’s memory.

It was at the Paris embassy that Harold first encountered the figure of Benjamin Constant (later a subject for one of his biographies). ‘*Beautiful*,’ gasped Miss Plimsoll, captivated by Constant’s portrait of Uncle Duff, ‘perfectly beautiful.’ Harold also thought it ‘grand’. (Afterwards he

changed his mind, damning Constant as an ‘incompetent’ portraitist who had failed to catch Uncle Duff’s Irish personality.) One evening, Harold stood by his bedroom window that overlooked the courtyard to the *porte-cochère*, admiring the steady procession of lamp-lit carriages drawing up at the carpeted steps that led to the front entrance. An official dinner and reception was being held. Harold’s cousin, Lord Terance (later, second Marquess of Dufferin and Ava), had betrothed himself to an American lady. Miss Plimsoll, who had now joined Harold, was visibly upset, despite the gaiety of the occasion. Distressed and unhappy at the ramifications of this projected union, she clarified her feelings to her young ward. ‘You would not understand, dear, and you mustn’t say I told you. But your cousin, Lord Terance, has become engaged to an *American*.’ *‘To an American,’* she repeated tragically, introducing Harold to the complexities of the ‘special relationship’.[14]

Harold’s Irish relatives cast an authentic spell over him, a constant fascination. Certainly, he never devoted as much time or energy to exploring the past of his Scottish ancestors, whom he once described as ‘a landless tribe’. Uncle Duff was the close relative he most revered. For one thing, Dufferin’s achievements and social status set him apart. But no less, aspects of his political philosophy held a certain appeal for the more mature Harold. Shortly after coming of age, Dufferin had declared himself a Whig, an act of faith that brought him an English peerage in addition to his Irish title. As an improving landlord, Harold wrote of him that ‘he pitied’ the Irish peasant ‘but did not really love’ him. He reflected further that ‘He wanted to better the plight of the masses, but they should know their place’,[15] sentiments that would later trip easily from Harold’s lips.

Yet despite his illustrious career, the closing chapter of Dufferin’s life was anything but gratifying. He had

innocently accepted the chairmanship of a suspect firm, the London and Globe, that speculated in mining stock. The company folded. Dufferin, his reputation damaged, had not only ruined others – albeit inadvertently – but had also sustained heavy losses himself, severely depleting the family fortune. So, was Uncle Dufferin a great man? Harold asked. Reluctantly, Harold was forced to concede that he was not. Kind, charming, greatly gifted, a man of integrity and moral courage, certainly. But he possessed none of the required vision and imagination, the swollen ego, the autocratic instinct, the iron will that marked out the truly great. Was he capable, even when pressed, of trampling on the opposition to carry his policies through to a successful conclusion? Harold would only say that Dufferin was 'a very great diplomatist'. There is much in Harold's interpretation of Dufferin's personality and career résumé that, with minor adjustments, might well be applied to his own. Harold's relationship with his Aunt 'Lal' was more complex, at least from her point of view. Tea-time gossip had it that she 'disliked' Harold as a small boy, finding him overly spoilt and self-indulgent. Time did not improve matters. Later, when Aunt 'Lal' learned about Harold's scandalous, *demi-monde* way of life in Berlin in the late 1920s, she 'took against him in a big way'.[16]

Still, Harold identified Ireland with the happiness of his 'dawn-golden days'. As a child he would spend his holidays being shuttled back and forth between the estates held by the Blackwood-Hamilton families: Clandeboye or Killyleagh Castle, County Down – a distance of only twelve miles separating them; or Shanganagh Castle, near Bray, County Wicklow. All conjured up different associations. Clandeboye – Uncle Duff's country seat – was a commodious Georgian building plastered in greyish chalk, a style typical of Anglo-Irish mansions of that period. Dufferin remedied whatever structural defects he thought marred his inheritance. Harbouring pretensions as an amateur architect, he

redesigned the house. A new, more imposing entrance, with stone cannon balls guarding it, was added. Additional rooms for family, guests and receptions were tacked on; an agreeable library – ‘one of the pleasantest rooms on earth’ – was constructed; and a vast series of domestic offices appended, sheltering under glass roofing and skylights, his consuming passion. But the net effect of this assault, at least in Harold’s eyes, was ‘one of structural confusion’. The grounds, however, suffered none of these imperfections. Consisting of a sequence of lakes, islands, gulfs, channels, hidden reefs and peninsulas, they culminated in Helen’s Tower, a monument raised in the memory of Dufferin’s mother, perched on the summit of a rounded hill dominating the sea.

Harold would often visit Shanganagh Castle, a late Georgian pile that belonged to his maternal grandmother, a strong-willed lady who championed women’s rights and higher education long before they became fashionable. Revisiting the castle many years later, ‘Old fears, memories of my childhood’, surfaced. Its overgrown garden, littered with Roman statues, its turrets and winding staircases revived ‘old terrors’; his old nursery rekindled ‘that sense of night-fears’. Yet how strange, for his mother assured him that he was a constantly cheerful child, bubbling over with laughter. ‘The gayest of my children,’ she assured Harold.[17]

Catherine Rowan herself was born at Killyleagh, which is situated on the western shore of Strangford Lough. Again, years later, Harold returned to the castle, now abandoned, ‘in search of the past’. Once again, as he roamed its deserted garden he could recall only the memory of his ‘nervous childhood days’. Yet Killyleagh also roused memories of more turbulent days, of rebellion, of betrayal and deception, of sectarian fanaticism as Ulster Volunteers challenged Irish Nationalists, for Killyleagh had been the home of his most notorious ancestor. ‘Tell me,’ he asked his mother one day, ‘who was Hamilton Rowan?’ ‘He was my

great-grandfather,' she replied. 'He was a rebel. We do not talk about him much. I think we are rather ashamed of him in a way.' But Archibald Hamilton Rowan caught Harold's imagination. Here indeed was a romantic moving tale of a dedicated nonconformist. Rusticated from Cambridge, Hamilton Rowan schemed with Theobald Wolfe Tone and Sir Edward Fitzgerald to found the Society of the United Irishmen. Betrayed by a government spy, imprisoned and condemned to be hanged, he succeeded in escaping to Paris where he consorted with Robespierre before finally finding refuge in the newly created United States. After ten years in exile he successfully petitioned the King for mercy and returned to Killyleagh. A rebel to the last, he lobbied for Catholic Emancipation, ending his days in Dublin in 1834, aged eighty-three. Harold came to write a charitable biography of this 'black sheep' of the family. In it he (half admiringly) characterised his great-great-grandfather as subject to 'Laziness, penury, domestic worries, vivacity, fluency, courage and a most impatient mind',[18] an odd collection of characteristics, typical, or so Harold thought, of the revolutionary mind. While appealing on paper, the life of an authentic revolutionary, of a resolute nonconformist, held few attractions for Harold in practice.

Harold came to regard these baronial castles as his 'anchors in a drifting life'. Here, he owned up, 'I ceased to be a pot-plant forever bedded out in alien soil.'[19] But even this comforting thought soon faded. It came as something as a shock for him to learn that his own family were little more than immigrants – admittedly, of three hundred years' standing – outsiders living among foreigners. All around were the dreaded 'Catholics', dangerous, difficult people who had casually surrendered their liberties to 'Fenians and Priests'. Among the servants at Clandeboye were fierce Orangemen who warned Harold that Catholics were 'evil men', 'alien, intractable, sly'. These impressions could only have been reinforced by Miss Plimsoll's paranoia, for she

would manipulate every incident, however trivial, to uncover the odious Fenians; or even by the often tendentious conversations he overheard when lunching at the Private Secretary's Lodge in Phoenix Park.[20] Something of this rubbed off, for in later life Harold frowned upon 'candlesticks' holding high positions of state, deprecating in particular John Kennedy's election as President of the United States.[21]

It was at Clandeboye – Dufferin's family seat – that Harold decided that 'the Protestant ascendancy was established'. His own attitude to the Irish question was very much in the manner of a tepid Foreign Office employee grappling with an intractable international crisis: he proposed 'benevolent neutrality'. 'I rejoice,' he wrote, 'that I am not concerned with any Irish controversy.' For all that, when pressed, he was drawn back to the hero of his family memoir. 'Is it atavism which dulls my sympathy for the Calvinism of Ulster and sends my heart winging backwards to Hamilton Rowan of Killyleagh?' Perhaps the day will come, he speculated, when their animosities will be shelved and the 'whole thirty-two counties will be peopled by United Irishmen'.[22]

In 1895, at the age of nine, Harold was sent to the Grange, a preparatory school near Folkestone, where he remained for four years. By his own admission he was haunted by 'child terrors', powerless to escape his 'nervous childhood days'. But he also bore another heavy handicap. Three years earlier, at a toyshop on the rue de Rivoli, he had humiliatingly failed to spin a top. From this fiasco, he derived 'the sad theory' that he was 'bad at games'. Such inhibition was not the best preparation for an English upper-class, public school education.

Harold retained few joyful memories of the Grange. He wrote later that 'We were cold and underfed: we were incessantly being bothered to live up to our moral tone',

the highest of any school in England, they were assured. None of this bothered Mr Hussey, the headmaster, who violated in the most savage manner the high moral tone he preached. A brutal martinet, he would 'kick us if we made the slightest noise'. Hussey

> 'spanked me for missing a music lesson,' he wrote to his mother, 'and said he would cain me next time. On Monday at 12½ he cained me, and then next at 2, and he cained me and found out it wasn't my fault he said that next time I ought to be cained he would let me off … Your *loving, loving, loving* son Harold.'

Given such a terrifying example, bullying was rife in the school. In one case, of a boy called 'Jack', Harold intervened to prevent the ragging: but with no success. Nor did Harold establish rapport with any of the other masters. Scolded for being untidy – he and his brother, Eric, were known as 'Rags and Tatters' owing to their chronically grubby appearance – he was mocked for drawing irreverent sketches in class. Small wonder that he dreamed of warmer climes and an abundance of appetising food. 'Neither the games nor the lessons nor the high moral tone,' he glumly concluded, 'were things in which, somehow, the masters expected me to share.'

Harold's discomfort was compounded by the unorthodox political stance he adopted. Not only did he defend Dreyfus from abuse, he also took up the cause of the Boers, defying the jingoistic fervour of the time. In assuming the mantle of a self-appointed martyr, he sustained his image as something of an oddball. Things worsened, became more personal, when in the ensuing Boer War the British army sustained an early defeat at a place called 'Nicholsen's Nek'. Patriotic cries of the loyalists would mock Harold during the morning break. Sometimes 'a few racket balls' would be. 'dextrously aimed' at him. On one occasion he

was subjected to ‘the methods of the Inquisition’. ‘You *are* a freak, aren’t you?’ suggested Alan Herbert (soon to be barrister, author, humorist; and, in time, Independent MP for Oxford). ‘None of your cheek,’ countered Harold, putting down Herbert, who was a few years his junior. Occasionally there was some comic relief, provided by Miss Plimsoll. She turned up one day, on the eve of their departure to join their parents. Standing upon one of the ramparts of Caesar’s Camp at Folkestone, her hand raised with middle and index fingers pointing threateningly across the Channel, she cried, ‘Now boys, all together, Eastward Ho! Eastward Ho!’ And the Nicolson boys obediently chorused, ‘Eastward Ho! Eastward Ho!’, only to be forced to repeat the drill for good effect. Harold estimated that they journeyed ‘Eastward Ho!’ thirty-six times during his childhood.

Whatever difficulties Harold encountered socially, he proved to be an able pupil. Once, when confined to the school infirmary with a severe cough, he wrote home: ‘Darling Mummy, it is so dull. On Saturday we had half an hour to learn the <u>whole</u> of England and Wales in and then we had to do a map of it out of our heads putting in the counties and the towns. It was <u>so</u> hard. I did the second best.’ At a school prize-giving ceremony years later, an old master, a Mr Nettleton, told him that although his written work had been ‘disgustingly untidy’, he was ‘keen’ at his lessons and ‘really good at Greek’. Harold, he went on, had been ‘certain to get a scholarship’, but apparently Hussey would not allow it. Hussey, Nettleton acknowledged, was really ‘rather a bully’. Reminiscing about the Grange in October 1950 Harold realised that ‘the regime of old Hussey seems to have been perpetuated by his successor … I can see that you [Jocelyn Brooke] were just as cold and miserable there as I was myself.’ He gained the oddest of impressions as he recaptured the past when he had been ‘so unhappy … Now if, as a little boy, I could have a vision

of myself today I should have been less unhappy. What oppressed me then was fear and a sense of failure.' Was parental indifference the cause of this sorry state of affairs? Harold, typically, apportioned the blame in an even-handed manner. 'Clearly it was a better thing to have been loved and sent to The Grange, Folkestone, than never to have been loved at all.'[23]

Wellington College was founded in 1852 in memory of the Great Duke. Formally opened in 1859 by Queen Victoria, it was intended to care for the 'education and bringing up, maintaining and clothing of the children of deceased officers, who may have borne commissions either in Our Royal Army or the Army of East India Company, and no others …' By the time Harold arrived in January 1900 the college was clearly in breach of these by now outmoded regulations. It was said that Wellington College was the creation of its first headmaster, the Reverend Edward White Benson (later Archbishop of Canterbury). Recognised as a 'stern disciplinarian', he was obsessed with the 'vice' of homosexuality, bent on ensuring that his charges remained pure. Wire entanglements were placed along the top of the dormitory cubicles to prevent any illicit toing and froing. At bedtime, doors would be locked from the outside while the matron and steward would patrol the middle of the dormitory. Every conceivable measure was taken to deter forbidden contact. By the time Harold's headmaster, the Reverend Bertram Pollock (later Bishop of Norwich) appeared, these draconian regulations had eased somewhat, though the spirit of Benson's regime lived on.[24]

Wellington sought social eminence. Under Benson it had enjoyed the patronage of Prince Albert, a practice perpetuated by Queen Victoria after his death in 1861. Under Pollock, the striving for social distinction soared as he conscripted two princes, three dukes, three earls, three bishops, six baronets, and a former prime minister to serve

as its governors. Several days after the relief of Mafeking (17–18 May 1900) Queen Victoria visited Wellington College. By now Harold had tempered his radical views on the Boer War, perhaps reflecting that discretion should now give way to valour. At any rate, he ‘shouted and halloed with the rest’, saluting the Queen in the appropriate manner. As the Queen, hunched in her seat, drove off in her barouche, Harold ran alongside it, clinging to the mudguard of the royal carriage until it left the school grounds and disappeared from sight. He recalled glimpsing ‘one large pendulent, and surprisingly pink cheek; … the glint of gold spectacles above; and … a band beneath the bonnet of beautifully brushed hair – the colour of dried straw’. [25]

Harold was not unhappy at Wellington, but he was ‘terribly and increasingly bored’. The grinding, repetitive timetable imposed from above wore him down: ‘One ceased so completely to be an individual, to have any but a corporate identity.’ Deprived of privacy and granted no leisure time, ‘One was just a name, or rather a number, on the list.’ Harold tried hard at games, or ‘exercise’ as it was called at Wellington, but only managed to ‘flounder about’. To actually kick a ball was quite a gamble, as it would inevitably ‘wriggle off sideways somewhere’. His inability to master the art of kicking a ball straight hindered his advancement through the school hierarchy. Eventually, in his last year, he was promoted to the rank of dormitory prefect, an unforeseen status owing nothing to his athletic prowess and everything to his scholastic achievements. Even so, until he came into direct contact with Bertram Pollock he claimed to have learned ‘nothing serious’ at Wellington.[26]

There were those who thought Pollock had inaugurated Wellington’s ‘Golden Age’; others thought that he had founded ‘a military Lycée’. Harold phrased it differently, recalling an ‘oppressive sense of regimentation’, an