

GREAT
CONTEMPORARIES

by

Winston S. Churchill



W·W·NORTON & COMPANY
New York London

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First American Edition, 1991

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Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Churchill, Winston, Sir, 1874–1965.
Great contemporaries / by Winston S. Churchill.—1st American
ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Statesmen—Biography. 2. Biography—20th century. 3. Great
Britain—Biography. I. Title.

D412.6.C5 1990

941.082'092'2—dc20

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90-42224

ISBN 0-393-02941-7

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
W. W. Norton & Company, Ltd.
10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN

ONE MARK of a great man is the power of making lasting impressions upon people he meets. Another is so to have handled matters during his life that the course of after-events is continuously affected by what he did. Thirty years have passed since Chamberlain was capable of public utterance, nearly twenty-five have passed since he was in his grave, and he has certainly fulfilled both these hard tests. Those who met him in his vigour and hey-day are always conscious of his keenly cut impression; and all our British affairs today are tangled, biased or inspired by his actions. He lighted beacon fires which are still burning; he sounded trumpet calls whose echoes still call stubborn soldiers to the field. The fiscal controversies which Chamberlain revived are living issues not only in British but in world politics today. The impetus which he gave to the sense of Empire, in Britain and even more by repercussion throughout the world, is a deep score on the page of history.

His biographer, Mr Garvin, has devoted the leisure thoughts of ten years to his task. He has evidently been keenly alive to his responsibilities as the personal historian of a remarkable man whose records have been entrusted to his hands. Although an ardent admirer of 'Joe' Chamberlain and a warrior in his cause, Mr Garvin has risen above party feuds and faction and has laid before us in all good faith and good will a monumental account of the life and times of his hero. It is evident that he has produced a standard work which every student of the later Victorian period must wish not only to read but to place upon his bookshelves.*

Chamberlain grew up in Birmingham in a period when world politics were the well preserved domain of Whig and Tory aristocracies and their counterparts in different nations. He revealed himself as the first intruder from the new democracy into these select but wide-ranging circles. All the activities of his early life had their scene in his native city. He had to make his living; he had to establish his business; he had to make his way. He was forty before he sat in the House of Commons. No easy road of favoured family or class

* *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, Vols. I-III, J. L. Garvin.

preferment offered itself to him. He had to fight every march forward for himself in the city where he dwelt and among the innumerable jealousies which are aroused locally by the first steps in success. He chose the ground and the weapons necessary for such a situation. Radicalism was his warhorse, municipal politics the stirrup by which he mounted to the saddle. Mayor of Birmingham, master of its local needs, a Super-Mayor attending to gas and water, to public baths and wash-houses, to very early town-planning improvement schemes, efficient far beyond his compeers, forceful against all with whom he came into collision, a fish obviously the largest and certainly the fiercest in a pool comparatively small.

The career of this eminent man and strong actuator of world movements is divided between the period when he was making his way towards the world scene and the period when he acted upon it. In the first he was a ruthless Radical and, if you challenged him, a Republican; in the second he was a Jingo Tory and Empire Builder. All followed naturally and sincerely from the particular pressures and environment affecting an exceptional being at one stage or the other of his life.

Thus we have Chamberlain the Radical Mayor – worse than any naughty Socialist of today – who questioned whether he could condescend to drive as Mayor in the carriage which received the Prince of Wales (afterwards King Edward VII) on his visit to Birmingham, and Chamberlain who popularized or promulgated the conception of a vast Empire centring mainly upon the golden circle of the Crown. Thus we have Chamberlain the most competent, the most searching, the most entirely convinced protagonist of Free Trade, and Chamberlain who lighted the torch of Tariff Reform and Food Taxation. An immense force was exerted with complete sincerity in different phases in opposite directions. We have a splendid piebald, first black then white, or in political terms, first Fiery Red, then True Blue.

The amount of energy wasted by men and women of first class quality in arriving at their true degree, before they begin to play on the world stage, can never be measured. One may say that sixty, perhaps seventy per cent of all they have to give is expended on fights which have no other object but to get to their battlefield. I remember to have heard Sir Michael Hicks Beach, high intellectual Tory Squire, his life devoted to State service, thirty years a Minister of the Crown, say in the Tariff Reform conflict of 1904, 'I was an Imperialist when Mr Chamberlain's politics did not go beyond Birmingham.' It was true; in the setting of the quarrel it was just; but it was not Chamberlain's fault that he had only arrived at the commanding viewpoints in later life. He had meant to get there all the time, but the road was long, and every foot of it contested.

First there is the tale of 'Radical Joe'. We see this robust, virile, aggressive champion of change and overturn marching forward into battle against almost all the venerable, accepted institutions of the Victorian epoch. We see him fighting now with a rapier, now with a bludgeon, to establish quite new levels for the political and social status of the mass of the people. In his stride he shrinks from nothing and turns away from no antagonist. The monarchy, the Church, the aristocracy, the House of Lords, the 'country party', London Society, the limited franchise, the great vested interests and professions – all in their turn became his targets.

But this was no campaign of mere demagoguery, of ranting and denouncing, of pushing and brawling. It was the hard, cold, deeply-informed effort of a man who, though removed by superior education and an adequate income from the masses, nevertheless understood their lives, the pressures under which they bent, the injustices and inequalities which rankled in their bosoms, the appetites and aspirations to which they would respond; and who, with heart-whole resolve, offered himself to them as a leader whom nothing should daunt.

Consciously or unconsciously he had prepared himself for this adventure by two separate sets of exercises and experiences, both of which have often served men as complete careers in themselves. He had built up with all the shrewd briskness of business competition a new and valuable industry capable of holding its own without favour or protection against all rivals, domestic or foreign. His business success was as sharp, hard and bright as the screws it made. He was able after twenty years of work as a Birmingham screwmaker to retire from the firm of Chamberlain and Nettlefold with £120,000 of well-earned capital. Money interested him no more. He had set himself free by his own exertions. Henceforth he was clad in a complete suit of armoured independence and could confront face to face the strongest in the land. Nothing is more characteristic of Chamberlain's life than the measured steps by which he advanced towards expanding objectives. He always looked back with pride upon his screw-making days. When he came to speak in my support at Oldham in the full flush of the 'Khaki' election of 1900, he said to me with a twinkling eye, 'The first time I came here was to sell them screws'.

But the second phase was also preparatory. He knew Birmingham as a citizen and manufacturer. He became its civic chief. No greater municipal officer has adorned English local government. 'By God's help,' he declared, 'the town shall not know itself.' The clearance of slums, the boons of pure water and the light and warmth of gas produced swift effects upon the population. The death rate of many streets fell by half in a few years. In June, 1876, he could write: 'The

town will be parked, paved, assized, marketed, gassed and watered, and *improved* – all as the result of three years' active work.'

These great achievements of founding an efficient British manufacture and the regeneration of Birmingham were completed by his fortieth year. In spite of all the friction which is inseparable from business thrust and drastic reform, the soundness and thoroughness of his work in these two different fields made a profound impression upon the city he loved so well. Birmingham followed him through all the shifts and turns of politics. It laughed at every charge of inconsistency, and changed its own political allegiance and objectives at his command.

From his entry into municipal and national politics in 1870 to his death on the eve of the Great War – a period of more than forty years – the loyalty of Birmingham was unbroken. His word was law. In him – whether extreme Radical or extreme Jingo, Free Trader or Protectionist, the galvanizer of Liberalism or its destroyer, the colleague of Mr Gladstone or his most deadly opponent, alike in days of peace or war – the citizens of Birmingham saw only their Chief. And when he died he transmitted his power in hereditary succession to sons who have held it to this day in his name. This is a record without compare in the political life of any of our great cities. It carried into the crowded streets, clacking factories and slums of Birmingham those same loyalties which had heretofore thrived only in the Highland glens. The romance of feudalism and the hereditary principle were reproduced in novel trappings around the person of a leader who had set out to abolish them both.

At forty-nine Chamberlain stood on the threshold of a complete change. His outlook upon our national life which, although always intense, had up to this point been narrow and short, broadened and lengthened, and he perceived that the remorseless unfolding of events had proved contrary to expectations both of his youth and of his prime. The rest of his life was to be spent fighting against the forces he had himself so largely set in motion. In 1870 he had made a tremendous onslaught upon Forster's Education Bill. Repulsed by the Church and Mr Gladstone at the time, he lived to support, reluctantly no doubt, Balfour's Education Act of 1902, which finally established sectarian education as a vital element in English life. He believed in his early phase that the British monarchy was doomed; he lived to see it the linch-pin of the entire Imperial structure to the building of which his later years were devoted. As President of the Board of Trade he delivered the most masterly condemnations of Protection and food taxes which are upon record; his memory will be ever associated with their adoption.

In wider spheres his policy led to results he had not foreseen. He was prime mover in the events which produced the South African War, and there are some who say that that war inaugurated an era of armaments and violence which ultimately led to the supreme catastrophe. He was foremost in the denial to Ireland of Home Rule, with the result that a generation later a settlement was reached on terms from which Mr Gladstone himself would have recoiled and after episodes among the most odious in living memory.

It will be difficult for the present generation to understand the overpowering part which the Home Rule struggle played in the lives of their fathers and grandfathers. The insurgent Ireland that we now see merely as a group of ill-mannered agricultural counties, outside the march of British affairs, in the 'eighties bestrode the Imperial Parliament. Irish passions, Irish ideals, Irish leaders, Irish crimes, swayed the whole structure of English public life. The Irish parliamentary party, with their wit, their eloquence and their malice, destroyed the ancient and characteristically English procedure of the House of Commons. They riveted world attention upon their actions. They made and unmade Governments and statesmen. Like the Praetorians of old, they put the Empire up to auction and knocked it down to the highest bidder. Thus the Irish problem was for more than twenty years the supreme issue. It was the pivot around which the whole political life of England revolved, and men rose or fell in power or fame according as they were able to comprehend how it might be solved or burked.

In this conflict Mr Gladstone simply swept Mr Chamberlain out of existence as a leader of Liberal and Radical democracy. It was one of the strangest and also most significant duels ever fought. The story opens with Chamberlain the champion of the Radical or, as we should now call them, the Socialist masses. No one ever in our modern history made so able an appeal to the ill-used, left-out millions. His 'Unauthorized Programme' of the autumn of 1885 was set forth in a series of speeches which by their grip, their knowledge, their poise, their authority and their challenge, excelled any constitutional incitement of which our latter-day politics bear record. Mr Lloyd George at Limehouse went much farther in a period when travelling was much easier, and many will remember how startled they were by that. But Chamberlain had a tenacity of argument, a thoroughness, a sharpness beyond the later and far more creative reformer under the modern franchise.

Mr Gladstone reigned in majesty over Liberal Britain. Unapproachable in glamour, tradition and oratory, he towered at seventy-seven above the stormy scene. He was a giant from a bygone

epoch. He had little sympathy with the practical demands of the working class for betterment. All those questions of social reform, of labour, housing, health, light, pure water, aroused in him only a cool though benevolent interest. He dwelt upon a plane of world issues, and he knew that the heart of Britain is stirred by sentiment rather than by self-interest, by causes rather than by gains. The great Liberal Party, of whose soul he had so long been the interpreter, should not be wrested from its allegiance by an upstart from Birmingham, however competent, however popular, however adapted to the New Age. So while Mr Chamberlain talked bread-and-butter politics to the working classes, the Grand Old Man thought of generous liberating crusades abroad or across the Irish Channel and disdained the material side of things.

It was little enough that Chamberlain demanded. All his reforms, then thought so shocking, have been achieved and left far behind us in our hurried journey. It is now the axiom of the Tory Party that the well-being of the people, the happiness of the cottage home, is the first duty of the ruler, once the preservation of the State is secured. But in 1886 Mr Gladstone beat 'Joe' on his own Radical ground. He beat him, and he broke him. He drove him into the wilderness. Never again during the Old Man's political career did Chamberlain hold public office. The battle was grim and, though Mr Gladstone conquered in his party, he was mortally wounded in the Imperial sphere, and he too was driven from power. In less than six months Chamberlain brought the temporarily towering alliance of Gladstone and Parnell to defeat in Parliament and disaster in the constituencies. The Grand Old Man expelled the rival from the Liberal household only at the cost of inaugurating what was virtually twenty years of Tory and Unionist rule.

Chamberlain never understood the Irish Nationalist movement, and its personalities were always antipathetic to him. All ambitious politicians wanted to establish contacts with Parnell. The home of Captain O'Shea, an obscure Irish member, presented the spectacle known as 'the eternal triangle'. Parnell was Mrs O'Shea's lover, and O'Shea, alternately threatening and complaisant, basked in the forced smiles and grudging political patronage of the Irish leader. Chamberlain was for a long time in touch with Parnell through the Captain. Gladstone, when he required to be informed, had a surer means of communication through the lady. Similarly Chamberlain offered Ireland extremely well-conceived schemes of local government linked to the idea of a Federal system. Gladstone, when he finally struck, flung down a 'Parliament on College Green'. In both cases he went to the heart of the business. But Gladstone himself only

saw part of the problem. He was blind to the claims and cause of Protestant Ulster. He refused to face the fact of Ulster resistance. He inculcated an indifference to the rights of the population of Northern Ireland which dominated the Liberal mind for a whole generation. He elevated this myopia to the level of a doctrinal principle. In the end we all reached together a broken Ireland and a broken United Kingdom.

The struggle against Home Rule was none the less the finest of Chamberlain's career. As is usual in life, neither side had a clear position. Chamberlain had tried hard to woo Irish nationalism and had been repulsed. Gladstone had estranged Ireland by coercion and won them back again with a complete contempt of consistency. There were ample grounds against both for taunts and mockery. Yet at this distance of time, and with the tale told in all its refinement, we can see that both men were natural and sincere. Their points of view could never have been adjusted. In Hartington's pithy phrase, they 'did not mean the same thing'. Gladstone never knew Chamberlain's power until he faced him in this deadly grapple. 'He never spoke like this for us,' he complained, after one of Chamberlain's merciless attacks upon the Home Rule Bill. Often must Gladstone have reproached himself that he had not taken more personal pains to carry his revolted lieutenant with him. But we can now see that it would have been no use. At the root the split was flat and utter.

Between the winters of 1885 and 1886 Chamberlain sustained a succession of staggering blows such as have rarely fallen in our country to the lot of a public man. All the political work of his life was swept away. All his hold upon Radical democracy was destroyed. His most intimate friends and comrades became henceforward his life-long opponents. The political rupture with John Morley, the tragedy of Charles Dilke, broke the circle not only of his public but of his private life and thought. His friendship with Morley had to be preserved across the gulf of party antagonism. His friendship with Dilke was valiantly but vainly extended above the abyss of personal disaster. He had to make friends and work for long bleak years in a narrow grouping with that same Hartington and those same Whigs he had been about to drive from the parliamentary scene. He had to learn the language of those very Tories against whom he had sought to rouse the new electorate.

The Irish were his most persistent foes. They added to British politics a stream of hatred all their own and belonging to centuries from which England has happily escaped. They knew that, more than any other man, he had broken Mr Gladstone and frustrated Home Rule. The malignity of their resentment was unsurpassed by

anything I have ever seen in this confused world. He retorted with scorn and long, slow, patient antagonism. He made them feel they had been right to hate him.

All these trials show Chamberlain at his best. His warm heart, his constancy, his perfect self-control, his 'genius for friendship', as Morley years afterwards called it, all shine amid these stresses. He was a faithful friend. No one differed from him more, or resisted him more consistently, than his comrade and colleague, John Morley. Home Rule, Free Trade, the South African War, furnished ever fresh causes of public strife between them. Yet they preserved their private relation. There never was a year in which they could not find opportunities of meeting and, when they met, they talked with all the freedom and zest of old confederates. Morley had an affection for him which the tumults of politics and the pangs of blows and injuries given and taken in the arena were powerless to affect. No such feeling ever subsisted between Chamberlain and Gladstone. All Gladstone's profound Tory instincts and upbringing ran counter to this challenging figure from the Midlands and the middle classes. The Grand Old Man did not like being outbid in his appeal to the working masses. He admitted him grudgingly to his Cabinet; he denied him the confidences and close association which he offered to other far less formidable colleagues. He never really understood the personal force and power of 'Joe' until he was matched against him in irreconcilable war. Perhaps it was just as well. I often used to sit next to Mr 'Jim' Lowther when I first came into the House. He had sat in Cabinet with Disraeli. He was a real survival of old times, the perfect specimen of the Tory Diehard, and a great gentleman and sportsman to boot. 'We have much to be thankful for,' he remarked one day. 'If those two had stuck together, they'd have had the shirts off our backs before now.'

When the Home Rule Bill was killed and the long Tory reign began Chamberlain found only one personal contact with the ascendant régime. Lord Randolph Churchill had led Tory democracy against the whole seven seats of Birmingham in the election of 1885. Crowds of working men, denouncing 'Majuba' and the 'murder of Gordon', and filled with patriotic enthusiasm, had confronted and almost mastered the efficient thorough-paced Radicalism of Chamberlain's domestic city. But in '86 these hostile forces became his main prop. Lord Randolph Churchill's authority among the Birmingham Tories was, in the crisis, absolute. He wrote to Chamberlain (19 June): 'We shall give all our support to the Liberal-Unionists, asking for no return, and making no boast or taunt. I will engage that all your Unionist candidates shall have the full support of our party.'

Discipline was faultless. Throughout Birmingham Tory Democracy marched to the aid of all the men they most abhorred and returned by solid majorities those it had been so recently the object of their political existence to quell.

But a long harsh interval followed. From '86 to '92 Chamberlain sat first with Hartington, then (after the latter became Duke of Devonshire) alone, on the front Opposition bench, amid the muttered reproaches of the ruined Gladstonians and the implacable hatred of Irish Nationalism. There he sat and kept the Unionist Government in power. He never wavered. Lord Randolph's resignation, occurring almost at the outset, seemed to deprive Chamberlain of his only link with the Cabinet. He was an example of 'splendid isolation'. The Salisbury Administration, through many blunders, plodded obstinately on. Immense patience and self-control were required. Chamberlain was not found wanting. It was not till 1895 that he entered upon his final and now most famous period as Colonial Secretary and as the great Imperialist.

I have many vivid memories of the famous 'Joe'. He was always very good to me. He had been the friend, foe and friend again of my father. He was sometimes a foe in my father's days of triumph and sometimes a friend in his days of adversity; but always there had subsisted between them a quarrelsome comradeship and a personal liking. At the time when I looked out of my regimental cradle and was thrilled by politics, Mr Chamberlain was incomparably the most live, sparkling, insurgent, compulsive figure in British affairs. Above him in the House of Lords reigned venerable, august Lord Salisbury, Prime Minister since God knew when. Beside him on the Government Bench, wise, cautious, polished, comprehending, airily fearless, Arthur Balfour led the House of Commons. But 'Joe' was the one who made the weather. He was the man the masses knew. He it was who had solutions for social problems, who was ready to advance, sword in hand if need be, upon the foes of Britain and whose accents rang in the ears of all the young peoples of the Empire and of lots of young people at its heart.

I must have had a great many more real talks with him than I ever had with my own father, who died so young. He was always most forthcoming and at the same time startlingly candid and direct. The first I remember was in the summer preceding the outbreak of the South African War. We were both the guests of Lady St Helier, who had a pleasant house upon the Thames; all the afternoon we cruised along the river in a launch. He was most friendly to me, talked to me as if I were a grown-up equal, and afterwards, as Austen used to recount, gave me all kinds of commendation. The negotiations with

President Kruger were then in an extremely delicate condition. I was no doubt keen that a strong line should be taken, and I remember his saying, 'It is no use blowing the trumpet for the charge, and then looking around to find nobody following.' Later we passed an old man seated upright in a chair on his lawn at the brink of the river. Lady St Helier said, 'Look, there is Labouchere.' 'A bundle of old rags,' was Chamberlain's comment as he turned his head away from his venomous political opponent. I was struck by the expression of disdain and dislike which passed swiftly but with intensesness across his face. I realized as by a lightning flash how deadly were the hatreds my agreeable, courteous, vivacious companion had contracted and repaid in his quarrel with the Liberal Party and Mr Gladstone. Nothing had been left unsaid by his former followers and associates. 'Judas', 'traitor', 'ingrate', 'turncoat' – these were the commonplaces of the Radical vilification by which he was continually assailed.

Six years later, after he had split the Conservative Party and convulsed the country by raising the Protectionist issue, I had my last important conversation with him. I was writing my father's life and wrote to him asking for copies of letters in his possession. We were at that time in full political battle, and although I was of small consequence I had attacked him with all the ferocity of youth, face to face in Parliament and throughout the country. I was one of those younger Conservatives most prominent in resisting the policy on which he had set his heart and the last efforts of his life. To my surprise he replied to my letter by suggesting that I should come and stay with him for a night at Highbury to see the documents. So I went, not without some trepidation. We dined alone. With the dessert a bottle of '34 port was opened. Only the briefest reference was made to current controversies. 'I think you are quite right,' he said, 'feeling as you do, to join the Liberals. You must expect to have the same sort of abuse flung at you as I have endured. But if a man is sure of himself, it only sharpens him and makes him more effective.' Apart from this our talk lay in the controversies and personalities of twenty years before.

We sat up until two. 'Joe' produced diaries, letters and memoranda of the '80's, and as each fragment revived memories of those bygone days, he spoke with an animation, sympathy and charm which delighted me. I think it is a pleasing picture of this old Statesman, at the summit of his career and in the hardest of his fights, treating with such generous detachment a youthful, active, truculent and, as he well knew, irreconcilable political opponent. I doubt whether the English tradition of not bringing politics into private life has often been carried much farther.

We have reached the period when Joseph Chamberlain's main effort is triumphant. Great Britain has at last joined the rest of the world as a Protectionist country. No one can suppose that, unless there is a world-wide change in fiscal policy, we shall recede from the new system; and, even if there were a great modification in all tariffs and barriers to trade, the idea of preference within the British Empire would still assert its full force. It was indeed an historic and harmonious event which carried his own son as Chancellor of the Exchequer to the fulfilment of his task and mission. The elaborate measures of social reform, the pensions and insurance systems which this century has seen created in our island, the high taxation of wealth enforced in different degrees all over the world but nowhere at such a pitch as in Great Britain – all these are developments of the original impulse towards the material betterment of the masses which in his first prime was so strongly given by 'Radical Joe'. But it was when as an Imperialist he revived in the Tory Party the inspiration of Disraeli and made the world-spread peoples of the British Empire realize that they were one, and that their future lay in acting upon this knowledge, that the life-work of Chamberlain entered its widest and loftiest sphere. The conception was not his, nor was he its earliest exponent; but no man did more to bring it to reality. Here then is the pedestal of what none can doubt is an enduring fame.