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# **The First Lady**

The Life and Wars of Clementine Churchill

Written by Sonia Purnell

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# First Lady

The Life and Wars of  
Clementine Churchill

Sonia Purnell

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For Jon, Laurie and Joe  
With all my love

‘I send this token, but how little can it express my gratitude to you for making my life & any work I have done possible, and for giving me so much happiness in a world of accident & storm.’

Winston to Clementine, on their fortieth wedding anniversary,  
12 September 1948, Cap d’Antibes

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## Introduction

Late on the evening of Monday 5 June 1944, Clementine Churchill walked past the Royal Marine guards into the Downing Street Map Room. Wearing an elegant silken housecoat that covered her nightdress, her beautiful face still fully made up, she looked immaculate and, as always, serene. Around her, though, the atmosphere in the heart of British military command was palpably tense, even frayed. She glanced at the team of grave-faced ‘plotters’ busily tracking troops, trucks and ships on their charts. Then she cast her eyes over the long central table, from which the phones never stopped ringing, to the far corner where, as she expected, she spotted Winston, shoulders hunched, jowly face cast in agonised brooding. She went to him as she knew she must, for no one else, no aide, no general, no friend however loyal, could help him now.

Clementine was one of a tiny group privy to the months and years of top-secret preparations for the next morning’s monumental endeavour. Fully apprised of the risks of what would be the largest seaborne invasion in history, she knew too the unthinkable price of failure: millions of people and a vast swathe of Europe would remain under Nazi tyranny, their hopes of salvation dashed. Uniquely, however, she also understood the ghosts that haunted Winston that night, thinking as he was of the thousands of men he had sent to their deaths in the Dardanelles campaign of the First World War. She alone had sustained him both through that disaster and the horrors of his time serving in the trenches on the Western Front. Now, tens of thousands



more were to risk their lives in northern France. Huge convoys were already moving through the darkness towards their battle stations off the coast of Normandy. He had delayed the D-Day operation for as long as he could to ensure the greatest chance of success, but now British, American and Canadian troops would in a few hours attempt to take a heavily fortified coastline defended by what were regarded as the world's best soldiers.

Earlier that evening Winston and Clementine had discussed the prospects of the gambit's success again, at length and alone over a candle-lit dinner. No doubt he had poured out his fears and she had sought, as so many times before, to stiffen his resolve. Yet it could be put off no longer; the command to proceed had been given.

Raising his face as she approached, Winston turned to his wife and asked, rhetorically: 'Do you realise that by the time you wake up in the morning twenty thousand men may have been killed?'<sup>1</sup>

To the outside world Winston Churchill showed neither doubt nor weakness. Since he had declared to the world in June 1940 that Britain would 'never surrender', he had become the voice of defiance, strength and valour. Even Stalin, one of Winston's fiercest critics, was to concede that he could think of no other instance in history when the future of the world had so depended on the courage of a single man.<sup>2</sup> But what enabled this extraordinary figure to stand up to Hitler when others all around him were crumbling? How did he find in himself the strength to command men to go to their certain deaths? How could an ailing heavy drinker and cigar-smoker well into his sixties carry such a burden for five long years while cementing an unlikely coalition of allies that not only saved Britain but ultimately defeated the Axis?

Winston's conviction, his doctor Lord Moran observed while tending him through the war, began 'in his own bedroom'. This national saviour and global legend was in some ways a man like any other; he was not an emotional island devoid of the need for personal sustenance, as so many historians have depicted him. His resolve drew on someone else's. In fact, Winston's upbringing and temperament made him almost vampiric in his hunger for the love and energy of others. Violet Asquith, who adored him all her life, noted that he was 'armed to the teeth for

life's encounter' but 'also strangely vulnerable' and in want of 'protection'.<sup>3</sup>

Only one person was able and willing to provide that 'protection' whatever the challenge, as she showed on that critical June night in 1944. Yet Clementine's role as Winston's wife, closest adviser and greatest influence was overlooked for much of her life, and has been largely forgotten in the decades since.

Neither mousy nor subservient, as many assume her to have been, Clementine was so much more than a mere extension of her husband's career and ego. Like him, she relentlessly privileged the national interest above her own health, safety and family; her list of extra-marital achievements would put many present-day government ministers, speechwriters, charity chiefs, ambassadors, activists, spin doctors, MPs and hospital managers to shame. Unlike Winston, though, she was capable of great empathy, and had a surer grasp of the importance of public image. In her trend-setting sense of style she was a precursor to Jackie Onassis – being known particularly for her leopard-skin coats and colourful chiffon turbans – and as a hostess she was renowned across the globe for her elegant hospitality; her skills at the diplomatic dinner table won the admiration of Charles de Gaulle, and played a crucial role in binding America to Britain's cause. For all this and more, she was honoured by three British monarchs, and also by the Soviet Union. But just surviving, let alone shaping, what must surely count as one of the twentieth century's most challenging marriages would have been a notable triumph in itself.

Winston once claimed that after their wedding they had simply 'lived happily ever after'. That is stretching the truth – never was there a break from the 'whirl of haste, excitement and perpetual crisis'<sup>4</sup> that surrounded them. She could not even go to talk to him in the bathroom without on occasion finding members of the Cabinet in there too, half-hidden by the steam. Nor were their exchanges always gentle. They rowed frequently, often epically, and it was not for nothing that he sometimes referred to her as 'She-whose-commands-must-be-obeyed'.<sup>5</sup> An opinionated figure in her own right, she was unafraid to reprimand him for his 'odious' behaviour,<sup>6</sup> or to oppose privately his more noxious political beliefs; gradually she altered his Victorian

outlook with what he called her 'pinko' ideas, and even her support for women's rights. But however furiously they might disagree, she loved him for his undoubted compassion, and revelled in her union with a man so 'exciting' and 'famous'. For his part, he simply doted and depended on her.

Throughout the first three decades of their marriage, Winston and Clementine were united by a common project: making him Prime Minister. When that day arrived their aim changed, becoming survival itself. And in peacetime, whatever her misgivings about his refusal to give up politics, they were jointly dedicated to his legacy. Not only did they weather repeated public and personal humiliation together, they overcame the bitterest of personal tragedies, and survived the all but intolerable strains of being at the centre of two world wars. In so doing they forged one of the most important partnerships in history. The question is not simply what did she do for him, but also what could he have done without her?

Even so, this formidable woman has virtually no public presence in popular history. While he is understandably one of the most analysed figures of all time, the preternaturally private Clementine has remained overlooked and unexplained. She is so elusive that there are differing views on such basic questions as the colour of her eyes (grey, blue or hazel-brown?<sup>7</sup>) and hair (ash-blonde, brown or red?<sup>8</sup>). Many people think Winston's wife was the 'American one', when in fact it was his mother Jennie who hailed from the US. Consult certain biographies of her husband and Clementine features as barely more than a passing acquaintance. The index of Nigel Knight's *Churchill: The Greatest Briton Unmasked*, for instance, contains not a single reference to her. Others, such as Richard Hough, author of *Winston & Clementine: The Triumph & Tragedies of the Churchills*, go so far as to claim that she was a 'nuisance' who added to rather than reduced the pressures on her husband.

It is certainly true that Clementine was sometimes rigid and unforgiving, but in these traditionally minded, one-sided accounts Winston's own testament to what she meant to him and his life's work has been conveniently underplayed or misconstrued. So have the perspectives of the many generals, politicians, civil servants and diplomats who worked closely with them both and became her fervent

admirers. Even Lord Beaverbrook, the buccaneering newspaper magnate who was for a long time her most loathed personal enemy, became in the end a devoted fan. It is ironic and telling that many of these observers are far better known than she.

Today we are fascinated by the deeds and dress of our contemporary First Ladies, on both sides of the Atlantic. In a different era Clementine largely, if not wholly, escaped such media scrutiny and hardly courted the press on her own account – even though she was a skilful operator on behalf of her chosen causes. Yet she was more powerful and in some ways more progressive than most if not all of her modern successors. Moreover, many of the struggles she endured still resonate – not least the gruelling inner turmoil Winston found it so difficult to understand, or help her with. It is high time for a fresh appraisal of the woman behind his greatness, one that may allow her contribution to be duly recognised.

The only major previous account of Clementine's life – an admirable book by the Churchills' daughter Mary Soames – was, although later revised, first published nearly forty years ago. In any case, it understandably treats its subject almost exclusively from the family's viewpoint, with conspicuous gaps in the story. Since then many revealing papers – such as the Pamela Harriman collections at the Library of Congress in Washington DC – have been released, or have come to light for the first time, and several former staff have opened up about their experiences. What fascinates over and over again is the strength of the impression Clementine made on so many third parties, including allies from Russia, Canada, Australia and America, as well as those who witnessed her in action closer to home. Some contemporaries recorded a 'physical shock' on meeting her for the first time. Who would have guessed that she laughed louder than Winston? That she was taller than him and decidedly more athletic? That he cried more than her and owned more hats? That the camera never quite captured her startling beauty and that she could, like a princess, lift a room merely by entering it? Or that she was not the paradigm of an upper-class matron but the surprising product of a broken home, a suburban grammar school, a lascivious mother and a formative year spent in and around the fish market at Dieppe?

This is not a history of either world war, nor another study of Winston Churchill from an alternative vantage point, though oft neglected aspects of his character do come to the fore. It is instead a portrait of a shy girl from a racy background who was related to Britain's most glamorous aristocratic family (in more ways than one), but was looked down upon by her mother, and disdained by the dominant political dynasty of her day. It is the story of someone who feared casinos and bailiffs, and struggled to bond with her children. It is an attempt to recover the memory of a woman who married the man variously described as 'the largest human being of our times' and 'the stuff of which tyrants are made'. (That he never became one is in no small part down to her.) Even before 1940 Clementine's life was packed with drama, heartache and endurance. But, colourful and troubled as it was, this was merely a lengthy and exhaustive apprenticeship for her critical role as First Lady during her country's 'death fight' for survival.

Prior to Clementine Britain had known merely the 'politician's wife', opinionated perhaps, but rarely directly involved in government business. Today we have much the same; women glossed up for the cameras on set-piece occasions, thin, smiling and silent. Her immediate successors – Violet Attlee in 1945 and Clarissa Eden in 1955 – were of markedly lesser ambition and failed to pick up her baton. Clarissa, Anthony Eden's wife, was glamorous, younger, more intellectual and arguably more modern than Clementine (her aunt by marriage), but she lacked a populist touch and admits she was never even briefed on government business, lacking 'the gumption to ask... I can't believe how passive and hopeless I was.'<sup>9</sup> Clementine's post-war successor Mrs Attlee was 'jealous' of the time taken up by her husband's job,<sup>10</sup> and Harold Wilson's wife Mary was at first so overawed at being the Prime Minister's spouse that she would be physically sick every morning.<sup>11</sup> Cherie Blair, probably the prime ministerial consort most involved in her husband's role since Clementine, explains the universal predicament: 'There is no job description for the Prime Minister's spouse because there is no job. But there is a unique position that provides for each holder an opportunity and a challenge.'<sup>12</sup> How interesting that a woman born into the Victorian age, who never went to university, had five children and could not vote until in her thirties, should have grasped

that opportunity and that challenge with greater ambition and success than those who have come since.

The case can be made that no other premier's wife, in a democratic country at least, has played such a pivotal role in her husband's government – arguably greater during the Second World War than the greatest of American First Ladies, Clementine's direct contemporary Eleanor Roosevelt. This appears all the more remarkable in light of how poorly defined and resourced the position is at 10 Downing Street in comparison with the White House. From the very earliest days of the Union the wife of the US President has enjoyed a status that, albeit not enshrined in the constitution itself, provides an official platform for public work and influence, backed by the heavily staffed Office of the First Lady. Clementine had no official staff, role model or guidebook. She in effect invented her wartime role from scratch, and eventually persuaded an initially reluctant government machine to help her.

Yet she never sought glory for her achievements, and rarely received it. She was genuinely astonished when noticed at all. Curiously, it was often visiting Americans who were most observant of the scale of her contribution during the war. The US ambassador Gil Winant was intensely moved when he accompanied her on a tour of bombed-out streets during the Blitz. As she talked to people left with little more of their lives than piles of rubble, he noticed the particularly 'great appreciation' she stirred in middle-aged women, who seemed inspired and uplifted by her presence. Marvelling at the 'deep' and 'significant' looks of empathy that 'flashed between her and these mothers of England' he was puzzled as to why the newspapers or indeed the British government made so little of what she did.<sup>13</sup> Clementine's huge mailbag at the time was full of letters from people grateful for her help; people who viewed her as their champion. But while others, such as the then Queen, have been loudly and widely hailed for their war work, her part in the story seems to have been lost.

'If the future breeds historians of understanding,' Winant wrote shortly after the return of peace, Clementine's 'service to Great Britain' will finally be 'given the full measure [it] deserves'. This book attempts to do just that.

# Chapter One

## The Level of Events

1885–1908

Fear defined Clementine Hozier's earliest memory. After being deposited by her nurse at the foot of her parents' bed, she saw her 'lovely and gay' mother, Lady Blanche, stretching out her arms towards her. Clementine yearned for the embrace yet was frozen to the spot by the sight of her father slumbering at her mother's side. 'I was frightened of him,' she finally explained much later.<sup>1</sup> But by then the damage was past repair. That moment of spurned maternal love prompted long-lasting feelings of rejection within Lady Blanche, such that Clementine was never to gain a secure place in her mother's affections. Nor would she conquer her trepidation of the forbidding Colonel Henry Hozier, who, she came to believe, was not actually her father anyway. For all the fortitude Clementine would show in adulthood, the instinctive insecurity that endured from her infancy never left her.

The Hoziers were then living in Grosvenor Street, central London, a far cry from the romantically haunted Cortachy Castle in the Scottish Highlands where Lady Blanche had grown up. Clementine's mother was the eldest daughter of the tenth Earl of Airlie, whose ancient Scots lineage was enlivened by castle burnings and Jacobite uprisings. Her seraphic face belied her own rebellious spirit and her parents, their family fortunes much reduced by the Earl's gambling losses, had been keen to marry her off. They were thus relieved when in 1878, at the age of twenty-five, she became engaged to Hozier, even though he was fourteen years her senior and only of come-lately gentry with limited means.

Lady Blanche's mother, also called Blanche, was a Stanley of Alderley, a tribe of assertive and erudite English matriarchs who combined radical Liberal views with upper-class condescension. They thought too much food, new clothes, fires in the bedroom and – above all – jam, the epitome of excessive indulgence. Champions of female education, the Stanley women had co-founded Girton College in Cambridge in 1869. No less formidably clever than these eminent forebears, Blanche senior had later mixed with the likes of the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, the Tory Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, his bitter Liberal rival William Gladstone, and John Ruskin, the art critic, designer and social thinker. She had also made her ineffectual husband switch the family political allegiance from Conservative to Liberal and was equally forceful with her tearful granddaughter Clementine, who was not one of her favourites; it was evidently unfitting for a girl of *Stanley* blood to show her emotions.

Hozier's family had made their money in brewing, gaining entrance to society through the profits of industry rather than the privilege of birth. Although his elder brother became the first Lord Newlands, a now extinct title, and Henry himself received a knighthood in 1903 for his innovative work at the insurance market Lloyd's of London, the Hoziers remained essentially *nouveau*: middle-class stock who earned their own living.

In the eyes of many in the City, Henry was a 'gay, flamboyant' personality, but the Lloyd's archives suggest a darker nature. He was a 'born autocrat' with an 'excessive love of power' and an absence of humour, one report states. He also suffered from an equally 'excessive' fondness for spending the Corporation's money. An internal investigation in 1902 revealed that his business methods, while apparently productive, were of 'doubtful ethics'. Some of his *soi-disant* successes were, in truth, exaggerated or unfounded and, after he challenged one persistent critic to a duel in 1906, his reputation inside the upper echelons of Lloyd's never quite recovered.<sup>2</sup> Clementine was probably unaware of these stains on his character, admitting in a booklet she wrote for her own children, entitled *My Early Life*, that she knew very little about the Hoziers.

The Earl, too, considered his son-in-law a 'bounder', and Lady Blanche discovered to her horror that Hozier's previous career giving



orders in the Army had led him to expect the same unquestioning obedience at home. Far from liberating her from parental control, marriage to the splenetic and vengeful Henry proved even more restrictive. Before her wedding, Lady Blanche had assumed that she would become a notable political hostess in her own right. True, Hozier briefly dabbled in public life – standing unsuccessfully in 1885 as the Liberal Unionist candidate for Woolwich, and also helping to pioneer the idea of an Intelligence Service – but he had not the remotest interest in hosting his wife’s freewheeling aristo friends. Nor did he want children, whereas Lady Blanche decided not only that she did, but that she would take the matter into her own hands if he refused to oblige her. It was not unhelpful that Hozier was frequently away on business and unfaithful himself. Sexy, bored and lonely, Lady Blanche saw no reason not to shop around for a worthy mate of her own.

Five years after her wedding day, on 15 April 1883, she gave birth to her first child Kitty. Two years later, on April Fools’ Day, Clementine (rhyming with *mean* not mine) was born in haste on the drawing-room floor. The twins – Nellie and William (Bill) – arrived after another three years. Of the four children, it is now thought likely that none was Hozier’s and that there was probably more than one biological father. Although it was not unusual for upper-class couples in the late nineteenth century to take lovers, the custom was to wait at least until an heir had been born before playing the field. Discretion was also demanded. Lady Blanche, though, ignored all the rules and there were rumours of altercations between rivals. Indeed, the blonde, blue-eyed Lady Blanche is reputed to have juggled up to ten lovers at once – a feat of athletic organisation she was pleased to advertise quite widely.

Clementine had no knowledge of all this as a child and the family has only in recent years publicly acknowledged the question marks over her paternity. The doubts were, however, well aired by others during her lifetime. Her mother’s own, albeit inconsistent, confessions to friends suggest Clementine was in fact a Mitford. Lady Blanche’s handsome and generous brother-in-law, the first Baron Redesdale, Bertie Mitford, was certainly a favoured amour. Photographs of Clementine and Bertie – particularly in profile – suggest remarkable similarities, not least their fine aquiline noses. Perhaps it was in tribute

to her sister's forbearance in sharing her husband in this way that Lady Blanche named her second daughter after her. Bertie's legitimate son David went on to father the six renowned Mitford sisters, most famous among them the novelist Nancy, the Nazi supporters Unity and Diana (whose fascist sympathies were shared by their brother Tom), the Communist Decca, and Debo, later Duchess of Devonshire.

Besides Mitford, the other prime paternal candidate is Bay Middleton, an avid theatregoer of great charm but private melancholy. He later broke his neck steeple-chasing but was a frequent visitor to Lady Blanche during the years when she conceived her eldest two daughters. She dropped hints to notable gossips about his involvement, although some have since suggested that this was a fig-leaf for her sister's sake. Such was the complexity of Lady Blanche's sex life we shall probably never know the truth. Even Clementine's daughter Mary Soames said she found it 'difficult to take a dogmatic view . . . Je n'y ai pas tenue la chandelle' (colloquially translated: 'I wasn't playing gooseberry').<sup>3</sup>

The excitable younger Mitfords relished their great-aunt's racy reputation, unlike the rest of Lady Blanche's family who thought her 'mad'. London's more respectable drawing rooms were similarly scandalised by the public uncertainty over the bloodline of the Hozier *enfants*, with the result that Lady Blanche was regularly snubbed. Meanwhile, her children were cared for by a succession of grumpy maids and governesses who vented their frustration by swishing their wards' bare legs with a cane. The one kindly soul in those early years was sixteen-year-old Mlle Elise Aeschmann, a Swiss governess who arrived when Clementine was three. She thought the infant girl starved of attention and took to carrying her around everywhere, despite Lady Blanche's admonitions against spoiling her. Mlle Aeschmann started Clementine and Kitty on their lessons, especially French, and though she stayed only two years her warm-heartedness made a lasting impression. Clementine later went to visit her in Switzerland and even helped her financially when in old age she fell on hard times.