
Opening Extract from...

The Face of Britain

The Nation through Its Portraits

Written by Simon Schama

Published by Viking

The Face of Britain

The Nation through Its Portraits

Simon Schama

VIKING
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

VIKING

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand |South Africa

Viking is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2015
001

Set in 10.5/15 pt Absara OT
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Germany by Mohn Media

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–670–92229–1

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C018179
FSC
www.fsc.org

Penguin Random House is committed to a
sustainable future for our business, our readers
and our planet. This book is made from Forest
Stewardship Council® certified paper.

1. *The Face of Britain*

'How will you paint me?' said the Prime Minister to the artist, immediately narrowing the alternatives: 'the bulldog or the cherub?'

'That depends entirely on what you show me . . . sir,' replied the painter, trying not to be intimidated.

The signs were not promising. On this first visit he had been made to wait in Churchill's book-lined study before a nose appeared around the corner of the door. Just a nose, in advance of the famous face. In due course the rest of Churchill followed: rounder, pinker, flakier, wispier, jowlier than most people, including the artist, imagined. A softly cushioned hand was extended. A tiny starburst of merriment lit the old boy's eyes. Graham Sutherland tried to put himself at ease; to concentrate his attention on the matter at hand. It was not easy.

Sutherland had driven down to Kent in his Hillman Minx that September morning of 1954 anxious about what he had taken on. He could hardly have refused. It was a plum job; anyone in their right mind would have killed for it: to paint the portrait that would represent Parliament's gift to the most famous Briton alive or dead, on his eightieth birthday. There would be a televised ceremony in Westminster Hall. The eyes of the country – of the whole world – would be on Sutherland and his work. And as successful as Graham Sutherland had become, there was a large piece of him that craved the benediction of the mighty.

He had come out of Deep Britain, from some minor tier of what George Orwell, describing his own background, had called the upper-lower-middle class. Epsom College, not Eton College, had been his school. Denied the fashionable Slade for his art school, he had gone to the then more marginal Goldsmiths. But Graham Sutherland had a lot going for him. He was strikingly handsome, personable, urbane, and there was no question of his gift with the brushes. There was in him, in addition, a streak of the social romantic, almost obligatory for

artists coming of age in the 1930s. (He never told Churchill that he was a Labour voter.) When he left school he had taken a job in the locomotive works at Derby, his lunchbox slimy with engine grease. And as well as a budding sense of knowing a world beyond the twill and tweed of his class, Sutherland felt himself embedded in the English landscape. It was the subject of the etchings which made up his earliest work, alongside the commercial graphic designs he produced to put bread on the table.

His work was good enough to attract the attention of the grandees of the British modern-art scene: those who supplied prospects, connections and gallery space for shows. Hans Juda, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, transferred his affection and his taste from his old, barbarized home to his new asylum, and patronized those whom he thought represented the best of contemporary British painting – in his view, John Piper and Graham Sutherland. The young director of the National Gallery, Kenneth Clark, was also among those admirers and, come the war, it was Clark, busy storing masterpieces in safe havens in Wales, who told Sutherland that he could best serve his country by joining the ranks of official war artists, a team which also included Stanley Spencer and Henry Moore. It was nothing to do with avoiding the war itself. Clark told the war artists that the country needed their work to record what it was going through and, for that matter, as a way to keep its collective chin up, and he was not wrong about that. Every so often their work was exhibited at the National Gallery. So Sutherland went off from his home in Kent to Do His Bit in Cornish tin mines and Welsh steelyards, but it was when he went to London during the Blitz that his modernism suddenly and spontaneously married up with his patriotism.

Like almost everyone in his generation, his vision, his working hand, his life, his sense of what art was supposed to do had been irrevocably changed by Picasso. It was especially the Picasso of the 1930s, when both the artist's sculpture and his painting heaped up tangled and broken forms, which imprinted itself on Sutherland as fitting for a time of destructive havoc. He was, in any case, drawn towards matter

that was both anciently eroded and brutally contemporary: tree stumps and half-extruded bones; the armoury of nature: thorns and pinnacles; claws and plumes: the roadkill of the modern world. There were times when the good-looking Englishman with the lively brush and the smooth talk was all ganglia and viscera, spikes and splinters. He didn't have to look far for inspiration. In London during the last months of the Blitz he was struck by 'the silence; the absolute dead silence, except now and then a thin tinkle of falling glass'. Amidst the flattened, smouldering, soot-fouled City streets and alleys about the miraculously still-standing structure of St Paul's Cathedral, he would, he said, 'start to make perfunctory drawings here and there and gradually it was borne in on me amid all the destruction how singularly one shape would impinge on another. A lift shaft, for instance, the only thing left from what had obviously been a very tall building . . . suggested a wounded tiger in a painting by Delacroix.' In the East End some houses had been sliced clean through: 'All floors had gone, but the staircase remained. And there were machines, their entrails hanging through the floors, but looking extraordinarily beautiful at the same time . . .' Disfigurement was all around him: a torn-up metropolis, the flayed skins of London pride.

A London *Guernica* was beyond him (though he venerated that painting). It was beyond anyone. What British modernists were doing instead – especially when they saw, as Sutherland did, in 1945, the first photographs to come out of the liberated concentration camps – were crucifixions: Passions of Christ. The nonpareil of these, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, was by Sutherland's friend Francis Bacon, to whom twisted torment came naturally. Sutherland, too, was commissioned to do a crucifixion, for a church in Northampton, and produced something using the language of traditional Christian devotional art – the collapsed ribcage; the spray of crowning thorns (bleached in Sutherland's image) – and frontally posed but overlaid with a patina of modernist gestures: a painfully hard ice-blue for a background.

It's impossible not to feel that Sutherland was looking over his

shoulder at the feverish brutality of Bacon as he did this; indeed, the two would stalk each other for many years until Bacon became dismayed by (or conceivably jealous of) Graham's co-option into the world of Clarkian connoisseurs and collectors. Whether or not he aimed for it, Sutherland emerged from the war years, despite all those shards and fractures, a painter of a user-friendly version of British modernism: brownish, lukewarm and a little diluted, like the ubiquitous cup of tea which, as far as the patriarchs of the London art world in its years of recuperation were concerned, he rather was. He was not as cerebrally abstract as Victor Pasmore or Ben Nicholson; he was not a clotted, mortary expressionist like Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff; not as playful as the loud boys of the Independent Group in Whitechapel, Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton (godfathers to a genuinely new British art). It wasn't that Sutherland aimed to be safe. If the work called for jagged and torn, like a crucifixion, he would do it. It was rather that he saw no special virtue in confrontational obscurity.

Along with his startlingly beautiful wife, Kathleen Barry, Sutherland was an accomplished social animal, giving off waves of easy charm, smartly articulate; just the ticket for Kenneth Clark, who, along with Juda, helped organize his first shows in London. It may have been that Sutherland at this point felt almost smothered by Clarkian benevolence. When Graham told 'KC' he was thinking of going to the Côte d'Azur, Clark frowned on the idea: 'You can't imagine Constable on the Riviera.' But Sutherland had no wish to be a latter-day Constable. Francis Bacon was there, and hardly seemed to have suffered painter's block. Sutherland's gods and heroes – Picasso, Matisse, Braque and Léger – all worked in drenching light. (He would get to meet the first three.) Off he went with Kathleen, staying first in a hotel, then moving to a villa owned by the mother of one of his well-heeled Chelsea friends. Clark may have tut-tutted about Sutherland losing his edge amidst the basking geckos, but he nonetheless supplied him with introductions to the Great and the Good.

Among them was the grand old man-monster of British letters 'Willie' Somerset Maugham, padding around in a silk dressing gown among

the gold buddhas of his Villa Mauresque. Maugham knew all about Graham Sutherland and liked the sound of him. A lunch invitation arrived; and since Graham and Kathleen were now established in Villa Fiorina, they could return the favour without too much embarrassment. At some point – according to one source – Sutherland is said to have remarked while looking at the picturesque ruin of Maugham's face that, were he ever to turn to portraits, the author was the sort of subject he would love to paint. This got back to Maugham, who then took him up on the notion. At that point Sutherland had had no experience of portraiture whatsoever, though when Kathleen drew some feature of Maugham on a napkin, he is said to have corrected it. It wasn't really his thing at all, he told Maugham, but when the writer persisted, Sutherland relented, on the strict condition that the work was to be treated as an 'experiment'. Either party was free to hate and reject the result.

It turned out to be the most powerful thing Sutherland had yet done. On the broad acres of Maugham's face he had caught an air of monumental self-satisfaction; a curl of the lip just short of a sneer. Asked about his style of portraiture, Sutherland observed that two approaches were possible. The first was Picasso's, which was to make a free 'paraphrase' of the subject, in which, nonetheless, some likeness had been preserved; the other was just to paint what was before one. His own way was the simpler one: 'to make as clear a presentation as one's efforts allow for what one sees in front of one's own face'. 'But,' he added, 'I think if one does that, sometimes the thing comes full circle, because if the thing is intense enough in itself it becomes a kind of paraphrase.'

'The first time I saw it,' Maugham said, 'I was shocked. Really stunned. Could this face really be mine? And then I began to realize that here was far more of me than I ever saw myself.' Then came the accolade that every portrait painter wants to hear: 'There is no doubt that Graham has painted me with an expression I have sometimes seen without being aware of it.'

Had Sutherland nailed something about the sitter that was more

'real' than any mechanically descriptive likeness could convey? Plenty of people who counted in the art world of the 1950s thought so, especially when the painting went on view in London. New offers came the artist's way, including a summons from one of Maugham's neighbours on the Côte d'Azur: the Canadian newspaper mega-tycoon Lord Beaverbrook. He was installed in true tycoon style at Cap d'Ail, where his old wartime boss Winston Churchill would often come and settle down with straw hat, easel, brushes and paint. Sutherland gave Beaverbrook the same unsparing attention – many sittings, careful sketches with both pencil and brush, elaborately gridded transfers from those studies to the canvas. The sitter, in his inimitable way, was happy. When Beaverbrook set eyes on the result he gave Kathleen one of his lizard grins. 'It's an outrage,' was his comment, 'but it's also a masterpiece.' The art critic Quentin Bell resorted to amphibian rather than reptilian analogies. Sutherland, he wrote, had managed to make Beaverbrook look like a 'diseased toad in methylated spirits'. It was high praise.

Maugham advised Sutherland that now he had painted him and Beaverbrook he had best not chance his arm. Best give it up, dear boy. That was not going to happen. In the early 1950s Sutherland rode a wave of giddy fame. There were shows at the Venice Biennale, in London and New York; commissions to design costumes for Frederick Ashton's Royal Ballet and prints for Hans Juda textiles; a massively opaque work supposedly evoking *The Origins of the Land* for the Festival of Britain in 1951. He was now firmly enthroned among the mighty of British modernism; mentioned in the same breath as Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein, John Piper, Barbara Hepworth and the *enfant terrible* Francis Bacon.

So Graham Sutherland was perfect for the Churchill commission: forthright but not brutal; figurative but not fuddy-duddy. When one of his friends, the Labour MP Jennie Lee, sounded him out on behalf of the all-party Parliamentary committee handling Churchill's birthday celebrations, he could hardly back away. He had been a war artist; he had done his best for the Festival of Britain. This was another task

to be tackled for the country, as much as anything else, as the painting would end up, after Churchill's death, on permanent display somewhere in the House of Commons. Duty called. Also fame. So why could he not shake off the mixed feelings?

Sitting in Churchill's study at Chartwell, Sutherland saw what he would be up against. To bring the picture off there had to be a shared understanding. Churchill had to have an open mind about the result; Sutherland had to paint with confidence just what was in front of him, without being cramped or paralysed by the weight of National Expectations. But he could not escape the sense that all of Britain was wanting an image that would embody everything that Churchill had meant during the war: the national saviour without whose resolve they would have ended up like France, crushed by shame and occupation. The portrait Parliament and the people wanted was not just a likeness of a man, it was supposed to be an apotheosis of Britain itself: the finest hour in the form of the finest man. When this sank in, Sutherland knew he could not live up to this cult of national salvation. All he could do, he kept on telling himself, was paint what he saw. Then the bigger thing – the 'paraphrase' – would happen. Or not.

Being taken around the House of Commons to explore where the picture might eventually hang did not lighten this sense of burden. Nor did Churchill's well-intentioned efforts to give Sutherland the best possible working space, namely his own studio; for this already implied some sort of deference not just to the Great Man but to Churchill, fellow artist! In a letter setting the date for the first sitting, Churchill laid out all the advantages of his studio: blinds to control the intake of light; the low dais on which he would sit. It was kindly done but, as Sutherland followed Churchill down the garden path and came into the studio, lined with Churchill's own paintings, he realized with a rising sense of panic that the old boy evidently thought of the whole project as a collaboration between peers and equals. (Much taken with Kathleen – everyone was – Churchill offered to paint her portrait in return.)

There is no question that Graham Sutherland, even with just a few

portraits under his belt, had already an exceptional talent for the genre. Later portraits – a brilliantly droll profile of his mentor Kenneth Clark, a study in beaky self-contentment; a gloriously lurid Helena Rubinstein; and the abundantly fulsome frame of Arnold Goodman – are some of the best of the post-war years. But for this particular assignment, technical talent was not enough; he also needed a grasp of the national psychology of the occasion: what it was bound to mean not just to Churchill and Parliament but to the whole country, for whom the televised ceremony would function as an act of collective gratitude. It would be a moment of national bonding in an uncertain time, akin to the coronation of the young Queen which had taken place just the year before. In these circumstances, Sutherland's purist insistence that he would paint 'just what he saw in front of him' was arrogantly naive. None of the great portraitists – not Titian, not Rubens, not Rembrandt, not Goya, not Reynolds, not David, not Sargent – ever painted their subjects as if there were no history attached to them; or without some consideration of where the picture would end up. The adhesion of history (as Jonathan Richardson had explained) was not something to be avoided: it *was* the sitter; it had shaped them mentally and physically. Sutherland could not simply stare at Churchill and trace this feature and that as if he were a figure arbitrarily plopped down in front of him that autumn of 1954. It was not a question of choosing between the man and the icon. By this stage they were indivisible. In fact, there never had been a time when the public, political Churchill was separated from the private, personal Winston, certainly not at this particular moment.

In medieval thought on monarchy a distinction was made between 'the king's two bodies'. The body natural endured all the ills and indignities that time visited upon it; the body politic, on the other hand, for the sake of the state, had to be imagined as immune to infirmity. Something like this was very much on Churchill's mind as he approached the sittings with Graham Sutherland. In July 1953, during the course of a dinner for the Italian Prime Minister in which Churchill's exuberance (on the subject of Caesar) had been in full play, he had suffered a major stroke. The disaster was kept secret from the country

and, to the happy astonishment of his inner circle, Churchill made a recovery so swift, and apparently so complete, that there seemed to be no reason why it should ever be made known. But Charles Moran, Churchill's doctor, was now always on hand and, to him, the Prime Minister admitted that he thought he had lost a little of his mental sharpness. It was, in fact, hard to judge how much the old man's faculties had been damaged since well before the stroke (even, if the critical diaries of Alan Brooke is to be believed, during the later stages of the war); Churchillian alertness was already suffering from daily dosages of cognac and Havanas. Those who looked carefully at the famous face, whether in cherubic or bulldoggian mode, might have seen in a slightly closed left eye the physiognomic trace of the attack.

It was not vanity that was making Churchill nervous about the portrait (though what politician has ever been entirely free of that?), but history. His famous quip that he knew history would be kind to him because he would write it himself came home to him when he contemplated what the story of his last years would look like to those who would chronicle it after he was gone. He himself was at work writing the later volumes of his *History of the English-speaking Peoples*. After the brutal shock of rejection by the electorate in 1945, his second prime ministership, beginning in 1951, came as vindication. It also had come at a time when the terrors of the Cold War, and Britain's uneasy position between the United States and the Soviet Union, had become unsettling. Though Churchill had resigned himself to the hard fact that, henceforth, America would be very much the senior partner in the alliance, he fervently believed that there was no one in British political life – certainly not his likely successor, Anthony Eden – who could navigate a course between the superpowers with as much authority and experienced wisdom as himself. So when a new and even more apocalyptic weapon, the hydrogen bomb, was tested, Churchill saw himself as indispensable to the fate of his country and, indeed, the peace of the world.

He needed to be seen as such, he thought; not as some doddery old duffer in a siren suit, nodding off over a snifter. While he acknowledged that he must at some point go, he was determined that he should

not be hustled out of the door by colleagues in his own Cabinet and party. Much turned on the timing of Churchill's resignation, since the next General Election could be no later than 1956. It seemed reasonable to many in the Cabinet – R. A. Butler and Harold Macmillan, as well as Anthony Eden – that Conservative prospects would be better served by Churchill going sooner rather than later. That way, Eden would have time to stamp his independent authority on government and the country, and the party would be in better fighting shape at the polls. By the spring of 1954 there had been warning signs against allowing the old man to soldier on. He had faced a storm of barracking and shouts of 'Resign!' from the Labour benches when he attempted to put a brave face on the chilling fact that, notwithstanding his friendship with President Eisenhower, the Americans were not going to permit joint control over the H Bomb. It was not so much the government's position about this which made the Tory front bench uncomfortable as the unaccustomed sight of Churchill failing to defend himself with his usual feisty counter-attacks. Instead of giving as good as he got, delivering the odd growly-chuckly one-liner, he ploughed relentlessly on with his dim speech, shuffling the pages as the din rose to uproar. The hyenas could smell blood and were beginning to laugh.

Churchill was not so obtusely self-obsessed that he could not see the force of the 'sooner rather than later' argument, though at one point he complained to Moran that Eden was not exactly a spry young thing himself and kept sending him 3,000-word memos containing 'nothing'. But he often reverted to his conviction that, with the international crises at hand – the fate of the Suez Canal, where the Egyptian government was beginning to make noises about nationalization, and the nuclear-armed Cold War – the party would be better off moving into election mode under his continued leadership. It all depended which Churchill greeted him in the morning mirror: the pink-faced, merry-minded, assertive leader or the exhausted old man.

Churchill procrastinated. He informed his colleagues that 18 September 1954 would be the day of his resignation. Then, over the course of an exacting trip to the United States, he thought better of it. Who

else could deal with John Foster Dulles, or Ike, or for that matter the post-Stalin Soviet leadership?

For all these reasons, the face that would appear in the portrait assumed a significance well beyond that of a birthday present. It had to be an image of his body politic: 'the rock', as he told the painter when he started to sketch. Sutherland later remembered that Churchill repeatedly – and indiscreetly – told him about the manoeuvres against him in the Cabinet and his party and the ill-advised efforts to get him out of the way; affronts he took personally as well as politically. In fact, Churchill grumbled constantly to Sutherland during their sittings about the attempts to push him out of Number Ten. Churchill may well have thought to himself, He's a clever man; he will understand what is needed here. But the painter had a political tin ear. He just carried on sketching. That the portrait had now become a crucial weapon in Churchill's resistance to his own demise didn't occur to him until after the disaster had unfolded. The stakes now could not have been higher. Churchill did not want his eightieth birthday to be some sort of ceremonial farewell, still less for the painting at the centre of it all to have a valetudinarian quality to it. What he evidently wanted was something akin to the photograph by Karsh taken in 1941 by which he was best known around the world: the picture called *The Roaring Lion*.

And authoritative dignity – he wanted that, too, especially since the presentation was to take place in the vast theatrical space of Westminster Hall, the common possession of Parliament and nation, beneath the hammer-beam roof commissioned by Richard II. So he told Sutherland that he ought to paint him in the robes of a Knight of the Garter; even though the Parliamentary Committee had specified that he should be commemorated as he had always been seen in the Commons: spotted bow tie, striped trousers, waistcoat and jacket. When Sutherland pointed this out, Churchill pouted through his cigar, shrugged and consented.

Though Sutherland later said (of Churchill's opening remark) that all he got was the bulldog, the back and forth between the two of them during the sittings was not combative. Churchill, the painter said, was

charming and often very kind. For her part, Clemmie, Lady Churchill, fiercely loyal and nervous lest the painting displease her beloved Winston, was almost girlishly taken with the artist. On 1 September she wrote to her daughter Mary that 'Mr Graham Sutherland is a "Wow". He really is a most attractive man and one can hardly believe that the savage and cruel designs which he exhibits come from his brush. Papa has given him three sittings and no one has seen the beginnings of the portrait except Papa & he is struck by the power of his drawings.'

None of this meant that the sittings were going to be easy. Churchill frequently arrived late, shifted his bulk about, fidgeted and, after lunch with the usual libations, could slump into drowsy torpor. 'A little more of the old lion,' Sutherland would say, as tactfully as he could. As the sittings went on, the painter became concerned that the truncated sessions would not give him the complement of studies he needed for the painting. So he supplemented his sketches and oil studies with photographs taken, first by the *Picture Post* journalist Felix Man, and then by Elsbeth Juda, the wife of his friend and patron Hans Juda. Her contact sheets have survived and are a rich document for recreating what those momentous sessions in autumn 1954 were actually like. Some were reassuring: Churchill walks around the garden, gallantly escorting Kathleen and Graham, smiling. But then, in greater number, he is seen brooding grimly as if the black dog of depression, or possibly the yapping Eden, could not be shaken off. But the low angle at which Elsbeth Juda's photographs were taken, after instruction from Sutherland, make it clear that, while the painter claimed to be painting just what he saw, he had a very decided idea in his head. He later said that he wanted to paint Churchill 'as a rock'. But he ended up turning him into a man-mountain: weathered, glacial and steep. Churchill's face, with the right eye oddly half closed, peered down, rather than addressing the viewer front on at eye level as in the pose Sutherland had set for Maugham and Beaverbrook. At that angle, Sutherland must have known it was difficult, if not impossible, for Churchill not to appear forbidding. On 17 October Winston's daughter-in-law, June, saw the progressing portrait and pronounced it 'brilliant, quite alarmingly like