

INTRODUCTION

This book is about a subject that has been overlooked or discreetly sidelined in Churchillian literature: his ardent and unswerving faith in the British Empire. His imperial vision was at the heart of his political philosophy. What Churchill called Britain's imperial 'mission' was both his lodestar and the touchstone which he applied to policy decisions when he was First Lord of the Admiralty, Secretary for War, Colonial Secretary and Prime Minister. Throughout his political career he was convinced that, together, the Royal Navy and the Empire were the foundations of British global power and greatness. Imperial Britain was, he believed, uniquely qualified to further progress and enlightenment throughout the world.

As Churchill repeatedly insisted, the Empire was a precious asset, not just for Britain, but for civilisation as a whole. It existed in a Hobbesian universe in competition with other predatory empires whose ambitions and anxieties led to the First and Second World Wars, which were imperial conflicts in which all the protagonists were fighting to safeguard and extend territory and influence. This was so in 1914 and again in 1939, when the British Empire was directly threatened by Italy and Japan and indirectly by Nazi Germany. All three powers were engaged in imperial wars of conquest whose objectives included the elimination of British influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East and the annexation of British colonies in Africa, the Far East and the Pacific.

Throughout the Second World War, imperial geo-political considerations were, I have argued, always uppermost in Churchill's mind whenever he had to make major strategic decisions. In both world wars and the inter-war years, he was also concerned with external and internal ideological challenges to imperial security. The danger posed by Pan-Islamism was the overriding reason why Churchill threw himself so enthusiastically behind the Gallipoli

campaign in 1915. Likewise and with equal zeal, he backed military intervention to reverse the Russian revolution because he feared that Bolshevik subversion would undermine British power in the Middle East and Asia.

Churchill's imperial preoccupations are central to understanding him as a statesman and a strategist. The kernel of his imperial creed was simple, enduring and frequently reiterated in his speeches, journalism and writing of history. The British Empire embodied the enlightenment of Western civilisation and, therefore, was a force for the redemption and regeneration of mankind. It was integral to that 'civilisation' which Britain was defending between 1940 and 1945. In Churchill's imagination, its enemies included Lenin, the tribesmen of the North-West Frontier, Hitler and, during the Cold War, Stalin.

Churchill loved the Empire with the same intensity as he loved individual liberty and the principles of parliamentary democracy. His two mistresses were incompatible, for the Empire withheld freedom and the right to representation from nearly all its subjects. This contradiction was overridden by the unwritten contract by which the governed forfeited their freedom in return for a humane, fair government which kept the peace and set its subjects on the path towards physical and moral improvement. Sophistry came to his rescue when, during the war, an American journalist asked him about Indian protests against imperial rule. Churchill wondered which Indians she had in mind. Were they the American Indians who languished in reservations and whose numbers were dwindling, or were they the Indian subjects of the British Raj who were thriving and whose numbers were rising.

Churchill's Empire was never static: he regarded it as an evolving organism, although he was determined to frustrate any development that, however remotely, would diminish Britain's status as a world power. Anxieties on this account as much as his personal loathing for Hinduism impelled him to wage a prolonged political campaign against Indian self-government during which he contemplated ruling India by force, a policy that seemed to contradict his essential humanitarianism.

I have traced the roots of Churchill's essentially liberal imperialism to his birth, upbringing and early political education. He was part

of the patrician elite of late-Victorian Britain and was imbued with that high-minded altruism which distinguished so many young men from his background. Public life was public service and a chance to do good, and the Empire offered abundant opportunities; Churchill's heroes were the soldiers who pacified frontiers and tamed their wild inhabitants, the engineers who built railways across deserts and the district commissioners who brought stability to areas of endemic disorder and governed their inhabitants with a firm and even hand.

By his mid-twenties, Churchill had absorbed the current racial dogma that identified the Anglo-Saxon race as uniquely qualified to rule and share the blessings of a civilisation. American on his mother's side, he convinced himself that the United States was psychologically and morally a perfect partner in this global enterprise. This conceit dominated his wartime and post-war dealings with America and made him enemies in both countries. American statesmen and soldiers were repelled by the notion of using their country's power to prop up the British Empire and their counterparts resented their country's subjection to American interests.

Churchill stubbornly refused to countenance the possibility of any divergence in interests and objectives between Britain and America. He clung tenaciously and often in the face of reality to his grand vision of the British Empire and the United States sharing the responsibility for guiding the world towards a happier future.

These are topics and themes that I have explored and interwoven in a narrative that follows the chronology of Churchill's career from the Battle of Omdurman in 1898 until his resignation as Prime Minister in 1955. Domestic matters have been included only when they intruded on Churchill's imperial preoccupations. There was of course no boundary between imperial and foreign policy since, as Churchill always insisted, Britain was a global power only because she possessed a vast territorial empire and a huge navy. At various stages and in order to place the subject within a wider historical context, I have paused to examine the nature of the British and other empires and the ideologies that were contrived to legitimise them.

Wherever possible I have avoided the academic and political post mortem that followed the death of imperialism and empires. A forensic exercise has mutated into a rancorous debate over the virtues and vices

of the old empires that shows no signs of flagging. To an extent, public rows about the nature of vanished supremacies have some relevance to the modern world since great powers are still trying to impose their will on weaker nations; the inhabitants of Tibet, Chechnya, Iraq and Afghanistan can be forgiven for believing that the age of empires has not yet disappeared. One by-product of the post-imperial debate over empires has been the growth of an ancestral guilt complex which has taken root in Britain. This *angst* adds nothing to our understanding of the past, which it distorts by imposing contemporary concepts and codes on our ancestors.

In writing this book I have endeavoured to navigate a passage between the extremes of triumphalism and breast beating. I have avoided drawing up a debit and credit with, say, the Amritsar massacre balanced against the establishment of a medical school at Agra. The quantification of one bad deed against a good one achieves nothing beyond reminding us that virtue and vice co-existed within the Empire, as it does in every field of human activity. As for Churchill, I hope that readers who feel the need to judge him will do so according to the standards he set for himself and the Empire.

PART ONE

1874-1900



Jolly Little Wars:

Omdurman

General Sir Herbert Kitchener, commander-in-chief of the Anglo-Egyptian army in the Sudan, loathed all journalists and in particular Lieutenant Winston Churchill of the 4th Hussars. He had joined Kitchener's staff in the summer of 1898 to witness the last phase of the campaign against the Khalifa Abdullahi and report on its progress for the *Morning Post*. Kitchener had objected strongly to Churchill's appointment, but he had been outwitted by Lady Randolph Churchill, who had enlisted her high society friends and charmed elderly generals at the War Office to procure her son's attachment to Kitchener's staff. Her success was galling since Kitchener, the son of a retired army officer with modest means, had had to rely on his own merit and hard graft to gain advancement.

Yet the general and his unwelcome staff officer had much in common. Both served and believed passionately in the British Empire and each was an ambitious self-promoting egotist. The general knew that a glorious victory in the Sudan would propel him to the summit of the Empire's military hierarchy. The subaltern treated imperial soldiering as the means to launch a political career. In the previous year he had fought on the North-West Frontier of India and had written an account of the campaign that had impressed the Prince of Wales and the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury. For Churchill, the Sudan war was an opportunity to acquire another medal, write another book and remind the world that he was a gallant, talented and capable fellow who deserved a seat in the House of Commons. Voters were susceptible to what he later described as the 'glamour' of a dashing young officer who had proved his mettle on the frontiers of their Empire.

On 2 September 1898, Kitchener was about to deploy 23,000 British and Sudanese troops and a flotilla of gunboats against more than twice that number of Sudanese tribesmen commanded by the Khalifa

on a plain a few miles north of Omdurman. Kitchener proceeded cautiously. European armies in the tropics did not always have things all their own way. Two years before, the Italians had been trounced at Aduwa by an Abyssinian host, admittedly equipped with some modern weaponry. Churchill knew this and the night before a battle a brother officer noticed that he was 'less argumentative and self-assertive than usual'. He voiced anxieties about a night attack which could easily have tipped the odds in favour of the Khalifa.¹

The Khalifa relied on the fervent Islamic faith of his warriors who, thirteen years before, had defeated a modern Egyptian army, broken British squares, stormed Khartoum and cut down the commander of its garrison, General Gordon. At Omdurman the Dervishes stuck to their traditional tactic of frontal assaults by spear and swordsmen. The Krupp cannon and Nordenfelt machine-guns captured from the Egyptians were left behind in the arsenal at Omdurman, although some tribesmen carried obsolete rifles. Discipline, training and overwhelming firepower gave Kitchener the advantage in a conventional battle. Artillery, Maxim machine-guns and magazine rifles created a killing zone that was theoretically impassable.

Attached to an outlying cavalry picket, Churchill watched with amazement the advance of the Sudanese horde which stretched back over two miles of desert. The oncoming mass of camelry, horsemen and infantry with their white jibbabs, banners, drums, war cries and sparkling spear points aroused his historical imagination. Was this, he wondered, how the army of Saladin must have appeared to the Crusaders? The spectacle was filmed from the deck of the gunboat *Melik* by the war artist Frederick Villiers in the knowledge that scenes of the battle would fill cinemas across the world. Sadly, his cine camera was knocked over by a shell case and his footage was lost. It was left to photographers, artists and journalists like Churchill to satisfy the British public's craving for vivid images of the Battle of Omdurman.

Kitchener's lines were protected by a zeriba, an improvised hedge of prickly mimosa branches. No Dervish ever reached it. At 3,000 yards the attackers were hit by shells, at 1,700 by Maxim fire and at 1,500 by rifle volleys. A scattering of survivors got to within 500 yards of their enemies, although Churchill was struck by the suicidal courage of 'one brave old man, carrying a flag' who got within 150

yards of the zeriba. Successive onrushes came to the same end. 'It was a terrible sight,' Churchill thought, 'for as yet they had not hurt us at all, and it seemed an unfair advantage to strike thus cruelly when they could not reply.' His feelings were shared throughout the army. Corporal George Skinner of the Royal Army Medical Corps observed that: 'Nothing could possibly stand against such a storm of lead, in fact no European would ever think of facing it in the daring way these fanatics did.' Over 10,000 Dervishes were killed and an unknown number died from their wounds.

The Khalifa's army began to disintegrate and Kitchener was determined to deny it any chance to regroup. A pursuit was ordered and Colonel Roland Martin and four squadrons of the 21st Lancers were instructed to harass the flanks of the Dervishes who were fleeing towards Omdurman, the Khalifa's capital. After advancing one and a half miles the horsemen encountered what was thought to be a party of about 150 skirmishers who were covering the Sudanese line of retreat. Roland's horsemen came under fire and he ordered a charge to drive off the tribesmen. 'The pace was fast and the distance short,' Churchill recalled. Suddenly and to their horror the riders found themselves galloping pell-mell into a dried-up wadi, crammed with over a thousand Dervish spearmen and cavalry. 'A score of horsemen and a dozen bright flags rose as if by magic from the earth. Eager warriors sprang forward to anticipate the shock,' Churchill wrote afterwards. With a 'loud furious shout' the horsemen crashed into their adversaries and there was a bloody scrimmage in which the Dervishes hacked and slashed their enemies. At last they were on equal terms, sword against sword and lance against spear. Churchill, who had proclaimed to his family and brother officers his ardent desire for the risks of the battlefield, preferred to have the odds in his favour. He had armed himself with the most up-to-date technology, a ten-shot Mauser automatic pistol, with which he killed at least five tribesmen before riding out of the *mêlée*.

The lancers extricated themselves, rode on, halted, dismounted and scattered the tribesmen with carbine fire. Out of the 320 men who had charged, 20 had been killed, 50 wounded and 119 horses were lost, casualties which provoked the future Field Marshal Haig to accuse Colonel Roland of criminal recklessness with other men's

lives. Churchill thought otherwise; the 21st Lancers had shown splendid bravery. His judgement was shared by Queen Victoria, who honoured the Lancers with the title 'The Empress of India's Own', and by the press and the public. Omdurman may have been a victory for modern, scientific warfare, but the lancers' charge was signal proof that the British soldier was more than a match for the Dervish on his own terms. 'My faith in our race and blood was much strengthened,' Churchill wrote afterwards.² He never forgot the charge and until the end of his life would enthral anyone who cared to listen with his recollections of those terrifying few minutes.

Imperial glory was followed by imperial shame. Injured Dervishes were left to die a lingering death on the battlefield, or were shot and bayoneted. Kitchener's subordinate Major John Maxwell organised death squads to eliminate prominent supporters of the Khalifa during the occupation of Khartoum. Hitherto, Churchill had admired Kitchener as a good general even if, as he privately admitted, he was 'not a gentleman'. His callousness after the battle appalled a young man with a quasi-religious faith in a humanitarian Empire, as it did many of his fellow officers and that section of the public which mistrusted imperialism.

Churchill confided to his mother that the victory at Omdurman was disgraced by 'the inhuman slaughter of the wounded'.³ There were rows in the press and the Commons, but the government rallied to Kitchener, who received a peerage and a gift of £30,000. He proceeded onwards and upwards to become commander-in-chief first in South Africa in 1900 and then in India. On the outbreak of war in 1914 he was appointed Secretary of State for War. The nation had an almost mystic faith in the imperial hero who had defeated the Sudanese and the Boers. Posters showing his martial moustache, staring eyes and accusatory finger helped persuade a million young patriots to enlist.

Churchill too did well out of Omdurman. He wrote another bestseller, *The River War*, and made his formal political debut by unsuccessfully contesting Oldham as a Conservative in July 1899. His version of Omdurman glossed over the mistreatment of the wounded which had so distressed him at the time, although his readers' memories and consciences may have been stirred by his bald statement that, after Omdurman: 'All Dervishes who did not

immediately surrender were shot or bayoneted.’ In the Sudan and elsewhere, momentary brutality was soon redeemed by the benefits of imperial government. Many years afterwards, Churchill flippantly recalled the wars of conquest of his youth: ‘In those days, England had a lot of jolly little wars against barbarous peoples that we were endeavouring to help forward to higher things.’

The Battle of Omdurman brings Churchill’s imperial creed into sharp focus. It was another victory for the British Empire and, it went without saying, another stride forward for civilisation. The two were synonymous for Churchill. This is what he declared on the hustings at Oldham and would continue to say for the rest of his life. The British Empire was a dynamic force for the regeneration and improvement of mankind. It brought peace to areas of chronic instability, it provided honest and just government, it invited backward peoples to enrich themselves by joining the modern world of international trade and investment, and it offered the blessings of Europe’s intellectual and scientific enlightenment to all its subjects. It also made Britain a world power. In the last chapter of *The River War*, Churchill reminded readers that Omdurman had secured Britain’s grip on the Nile and the Red Sea and facilitated the expulsion of the French from a strategically vital region.

Omdurman had been an exhilarating experience for Churchill the romantic and Churchill the historian. He was already steeped in history and he believed that he could identify its primal impulses and where they were leading mankind. The battle had been one of those moments of high drama which appealed to Churchill’s sense of the theatre of great events. They were the raw material for the rich and evocative style of prose which he was already cultivating. Here, from *The River War*, is his account of an incident in the 1885 Sudanese campaign in which a British square is attacked by Dervishes:

Ragged white figures spring up in hundreds. Emirs on horses appear as if by magic. Everywhere are men running swiftly forward, waving their spears and calling upon the Prophet of God to speed their enterprise. The square halts. The weary men begin to fire with thoughtful care. The Dervishes drop quickly. On then, children of the desert!

War fascinated Churchill. In 1898 it still had an afterglow of Napoleonic glamour which, he was shrewd enough to realise, was about to fade away for ever. 'The wars of the peoples', he predicted in 1900, 'will be more terrible than those of the kings.' Of course he was right. Many of his brother officers, including Haig, would command armies in the trenches, fighting the industrialised warfare of the masses and mass casualties. At Omdurman, Churchill experienced a battle that could still be considered as glamorous, not least because it contained an episode which epitomised (in the imagination if not the reality) all the romance of war, a cavalry charge. Churchill thought that he had been very lucky to have taken part in such a stirring anachronism.

Churchill's history was always selective. Lingering over the slaughter after Omdurman would at the very least have compromised the moral elements in his wider imperial vision. He was discovering the power to control history and, through his version of it, harness it to promote his own version of Britain's imperial destiny. His accounts of the 1897 Malakand campaign, the Sudan war and early operations during the Boer War of 1899 to 1902 commanded national attention. They also established Churchill's reputation as a pundit on the art of war who understood the military mind and had mastered the technicalities of strategy and tactics. His authority in such matters was enhanced by his graphic prose and dazzling rhetoric. Churchill understood and implicitly believed in Disraeli's aphorism 'It is with words that we govern men'. At every stage of his career, he wrote compelling histories which described the events he had witnessed and, most important of all for an ambitious politician, how he shaped them. The results were subjective, occasionally misleading and always gripping.

War was part and parcel of imperialism. Territory was acquired by victories and imperial rule was sustained by the use of maximum force whenever resistance occurred. Yet, as Churchill came to appreciate, the expediencies of the battlefield drove exasperated commanders to jettison those moral codes which, he believed, defined Britain as an agent of civilisation. Writing home in 1897 after a bout of hard fighting on the North-West Frontier, he mentioned that the Pashtun 'kill and mutilate' captured or injured men, and that in retaliation

‘we kill their wounded’. He added that he had not ‘soiled my hands’ with such ‘dirty work’.⁴ Here and at Omdurman, Churchill had had a foretaste of the predicaments he would later encounter as a minister responsible for the actions of frustrated and vengeful subordinates who suspended the moral principles which he believed were the foundations of the Empire.