

*Talks de: A Question of Leadership  
 by Peter Clarke (1999)*

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# CHURCHILL: LOST EMPIRES

His father, whom he hardly knew, died of syphilis; his mother was a woman of easy virtue whose affairs were to cause him embarrassment; he was a victim of that peculiar upper-class form of child neglect which threw him on the mercy of servants; his education was patchy at best and if, as with Lloyd George, university was out of the question, what he lacked were academic qualifications rather than the right social background. For Winston Churchill was no ordinary deprived child any more than Lloyd George was the product of an ordinary workman's cottage; and it must be admitted that they were not noticeably overshadowed by their Oxbridge contemporaries in the cabinets of the first half of this century. Churchill was the grandson of the 7th Duke of Marlborough and, from the death of Lord Randolph Churchill in 1895 to the birth of the 9th Duke's elder son in 1897, Winston was the heir to the title. His unique record is that he might twice have become a Duke: the first time through heredity in the nineteenth century and the second time through merit in the twentieth.

Churchill's rise was as startling as that of his father. He exploited his family advantages through his own efforts, which were prodigious. Trained as a soldier, sent out to the imperial frontier, he soon put aside the sword for the pen and made his name and his fortune as a war correspondent in South Africa. By 1901 his royalties and lecture fees had given



UNDER HIS MASTERS EYE.  
 Seen—Mel Herrmann, on board the *Albion* yacht—*Londoner*.  
 Mr. Winston Churchill, "ANY BONE NEWS?"  
 Mr. Asquith, "HOW CAN THERE BE WITH YOU BENE?"

(*Punch*, 21 May 1913)

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#### A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP

him £10,000, at a time when a labourer's wage was £1 a week. The first of his big books was naturally a two-volume *Life of Lord Randolph Churchill*, with co-operation from all the top politicians of that era and a handy advance of £8,000. Throughout his life, Churchill earned – and spent – on an heroic scale. Words dripped as profusely from his pen as the champagne flowed copiously down his throat.

Elected as a Conservative MP at twenty-five, he was, within eight years, a Liberal Cabinet minister: one who was soon second only to Lloyd George as a forceful spokesman for the Left in his new party. In the course of writing the biography of his father, he had, to his own satisfaction, reinterpreted the career of Lord Randolph as a principled essay in Tory Democracy, and drawn from its failure the lesson that an active legislative policy of social reform – populist in style and paternalist in content – was now properly the province of the Liberal Party. Moreover, he did his homework on the New Liberalism, just as he had educated himself in the Army, poring over the books which Lloyd George never read and mastering his ministerial brief with a professionalism for which Asquith had a subterranean fellow-feeling underneath his own affectation of effortless superiority. It was as Asquith's protégé that Churchill was promoted into the front rank, yet the Prime Minister could tell Venetia Stanley in 1915 that 'I regard his future with misgivings', despite a professed fondness for Churchill. 'He will never get to the top in English politics, with all his wonderful gifts,' Asquith predicted; 'to speak with the tongues of men and angels, and to spend laborious days and nights in administration, is no good, if a man does not inspire trust.'