

An Interview with Lady Soames

“FATHER ALWAYS CAME FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD”

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As Churchill’s daughter, Mary Soames had the run of 10 Downing Street and helped arrange dinner with Stalin.

She talks to Graham Turner about eighty rich and varied years.

Graham Turner is a journalist whom we knew years ago when he covered the motor industry and wrote a penetrating, oft-quoted book, *The Leyland Papers*. He has since moved to weightier subjects for the *Daily Telegraph*, by whose kind permission this article is reprinted.

“I don’t think I was necessarily intended,” said Mary Soames, Winston and Clementine Churchill’s youngest daughter, “but I suppose I was the child of consolation. My parents were shattered when their third daughter, Marigold—who was only two and a half years old—died in 1921. It’s clear from letters my father wrote to my mother that, when I arrived the following year, he was delighted that the nursery had started again.”

Mary Soames

The way in which Marigold died was to have a decisive influence on Lady Soames’s own life. “Mummy had left her in the charge of a French nursery governess, Mademoiselle Rose, while she went to stay with the Duke and Duchess of Westminster at their home in Cheshire. Marigold, who was known as “Duckadilly” in the family, developed a very sore throat but, even when she became really ill, the governess still waited a day or two before sending for my mother. By that time, there was nothing even a specialist could do for her.

“Mummy didn’t blame the governess in any way but, of course, the whole thing shook her deeply. It wasn’t only grief and loss. She knew she was going to have to be away a lot because of Father’s involvement in politics. So she decided she had to have someone of more stature to look after the remaining children—Diana, who was 12; Randolph, who was 10; and Sarah, who was almost eight.

“She asked her first cousin, Madeline Whyte, an impoverished gentlewoman who’d trained as a Norland nurse, to take over. Nana, as we called her, was in charge when I was born, and she dominated my whole life when I was a child.”

Lady Soames points to a portrait of a thoroughly grumpy-looking little girl on the other side of the room. “That’s me when I was four,” she says, as she pours the coffee. “As you can see, I was in a temper, I didn’t want to be painted, I’d been made to sit on Nana’s lap, and I was very cross!”

There are Churchills all around us as we talk in the drawing room of her Holland Park home: busts, photos, paintings of them, paintings by them. The most striking is a superb picture of the goldfish pool at Chartwell, painted by her father and left to her by her mother.

Soon, Lady Soames will start to write her own memoirs. She won't, she admits, find it easy to write about herself, but she has kept her diaries and, in her characteristically unself-important way, she will be looking back over 80 astonishing rich and varied years.

She has lived at Chequers and in both Number 10 and Number 11 Downing Street. She saw Churchill's wilderness years from the viewpoint of an intensely aware teenager who had always been treated as an intelligent adult by her father. In 1945, she was at Potsdam with him and helped to arrange his dinner with Stalin—whom she remembers as “small, dapper and rather twinkly”—and Harry Truman.

She spent four years in Paris when her husband, Christopher, was ambassador, and knew not only de Gaulle and Pompidou but also the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. She was with Christopher again when, in 1979, as governor of Rhodesia, he handed over that last great remnant of the Empire to an apparently benign Robert Mugabe.

She is also the only one of Churchill's children whose life has not ended in major tragedy or sadness, and she suspects that Nana had a great deal to do with it.

“She was very upright, very Scottish, very religious,” said Lady Soames, “and it was she who gave me my faith. It was real to her and she made it real to me. She gave me frightfully good religious books which I don't remember now. We got on our knees for prayer-time every night; and she found me a very good children's service, not far from Chartwell, in a parish with a very magnetic priest.

“I think I became a pretty good little prig, quite judgmental—which is not very attractive in the young—but church never seemed dull and the church year became part of my life. Nana inspired me, inculcated in me a sense of the discipline of it, and I'm very grateful to her.

“My own parents, you see, were not religious; they weren't churchgoers, though my father supported the whole idea and my mother was certainly a believer. As a matter of fact, she did become a churchgoer in the last years of her life. She loved going with all of us every week when she stayed with us after Papa died.

“When it came to holidays—with local friends who invited me to Scotland or Brittany—it was always Nana who took me. Holidays are a great part of childhood, and that is where Mummy lost out because of the intensity of her life with Father. He always came first, second and third.

“I remember after I was married and had three or four children, we'd had a hilarious afternoon together and, afterwards, when the children went off, she said a very sad thing to me: ‘I see you having such fun with your children and I missed out on that with all of mine.’ I felt so sorry for her.

“Mummy never came to school dos, either—I was sent to two private day schools in Limpsfield

—and it was Nana, again, who held the fort at Chartwell while she was away with Papa. She read aloud to me for hours—Kipling, *The Cuckoo Clock* and, of course, *Black Beauty*.

“I was always in awe of Mummy, really quite frightened of her. To me, she was a goddess figure, though she was always accessible. She organised things very well, she just didn’t participate much in my early life. I could never confide in her. The grown-ups always referred to Nana as Cousin Moppett, but she was my confidante.

“Yet, although my mother was so involved in father’s political life, I honestly never resented it or felt neglected. I always understood that there were more important things to be done.” Mary was clearly a child who saw things through grown-up eyes.

“Mummy was particularly severe on manners. I was taught to play the part, to go and tell Aunt Goonie [Churchill’s brother Jack’s wife] that lunch was ready; I had to be in the front hall to say goodbye to visitors; I was made to be very polite and shut up. At lunch with the grown-ups—we never had a separate Pig’s Table for the children as the Salisburys did at Hatfield—I definitely had to sit it out. I was never allowed to get down before the pudding was finished and I was expected to talk to whomever was there.

“Mummy could be very freezing and cutting if she was angry. Yet she wasn’t at all a cold figure. Underneath, she was really boiling with passion. She once threw a dish of spinach at my father, though she wasn’t a bad-tempered woman and recovered very quickly. Father, on the other hand, was frightfully noisy when he lost his temper.

“I don’t remember long periods of chill at Chartwell. There were blow-ups and boo-hoo and banging doors and then it was over and they were reconciled. Summer storms!

“I was effectively brought up as an only child. In those early years, Randolph and Diana were quite beyond my ken. Diana seemed quite middle-aged to me, a lot higher up the slopes of Olympus, while Randolph could be quite alarming, very noisy and quarrelsome. If he was in the right mood, he’d pick a quarrel with a chair.

“With Sarah, on the other hand, there was a definite period of overlap. When I was four, she was 11 and she was very sweet to me. We used to ride for hours on the sofa arms. She was always Lady Helen, who wore a top hat and veil and rode side-saddle, and I was always Lady Podgy. I only had a bowler hat and always acted as the dogsbody to open gates and pick up her riding crop if she dropped it.

“When she went away to school, I missed her terribly but, when she came home for holidays, it was wonderful. Then, of course, she started having boyfriends and that was very exciting, though she did slightly tyrannise over me. I had to be the ball-boy when she played tennis with them. I fell in love with a series of them and felt that Sarah didn’t appreciate any of them enough!”

Suddenly, when Mary was 12 or 13, her mother started to become much closer to her. “There was a struggle of wills between Mummy and Nana because she thought Nana’s influence had become too strong. As I say, I’d become a pretty good prig by that time and it drove my mother mad. She didn’t say anything but had obviously decided to put Nana in her place and, from that time on, gave me more of herself.

“She started taking me skiing in Austria and Switzerland. She also, for several years, hired a tennis coach who came to the house twice every week during the summer holidays—and then we’d all have a game together.”

As the years went by, Mary began to understand how much her mother had been affected by what she calls “the uncertainties of her early life.”

Uncertainties is putting it mildly. Clementine’s mother, Lady Blanche Hozier, daughter of the Earl of Airlie, was a lifelong gambler who was said to have had nine lovers. “She was thought to have overstepped the mark a bit,” said Lady Soames drily. “Dear oh dear, the Edwardians didn’t half go it!” She pointed to another portrait. “That’s Blanche as a girl, looking as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. She obviously had a way with her.”

There was, inevitably, speculation about who Clementine’s father really was, and a general belief that it was most unlikely to have been Blanche’s husband, Henry. “I was never asked at what point Mama realised Hozier was not her father,” says Lady Soames. “I don’t think it dawned on her until well into middle age, but it would have been very bothering to her.”

Clementine’s parents separated when she was five, with the result that she and her mother “were perennially badly off and constantly lived in rented rooms.” They were so strapped for cash, and Blanche was thought so disreputable, that she did not feel able to bring out her daughter in the standard upper-class style.

She turned, in desperation, to an aunt by marriage, Lady St. Helier—“a frightful snob,” said Lady Soames—to do it for her. “There was no question of my mother having a ball of her own and she was always short of clothes in a period when people dressed up tremendously. It was Mary St. Helier who bought her first ballgowns and took her to other people’s balls. Her mother played no part in her debut.”

So, although Clementine was much admired when she came out, she was both nervous and lacking in confidence after such a strange, unhappy childhood. “She almost came out by proxy, and she would have felt it keenly, though she never mentioned it. That, perhaps, is one of the reasons why she was never easy to get to know.”

Clementine’s insecure, fatherless childhood also helps to explain the fact that she suffered from both hysteria and deep depressions throughout her life.

“Mama never really liked Chartwell,” Lady Soames went on. “It was very expensive to run, with eight or nine servants in the house and three gardeners, as well as father’s secretaries, and the fragility of my parents’ economic raft worried her terribly. They lived from one of Papa’s books to the next. There would be great harouches where you’d be shouted at for not turning the lights off. The house was a great burden to her.

“I, on the other hand, adored the freedom of Chartwell. I hardly remember 11 Downing Street—I was only three when Papa became Chancellor—and I don’t think I spent a night out of my own bed at Chartwell, apart from holidays, until I was seven or eight. I loved the things Papa did there. When he was bricklaying, I pretended to help. In those early years, I had no perception of him as a great man but, in my teens, I started reading newspapers and realised that he was in something called ‘public life.’”

“During his wilderness years in the 1930s, I slowly became aware of the great issues in which my parents were involved. When appeasement reared its head, there was an awful, unreasoning hatred of the government. Chamberlain was a word of opprobrium. In those years, there were plenty of enemies, not all of them abroad.

“Lots of people came—Bob Boothby, the Cranbornes, the Duff Coopers. I remember Duff getting into tremendous rages, which he called ‘veiners’ because he had a vein in his face which throbbed alarmingly when he was in one. He and Papa would shout at each other and have frightful political ding-dongs, though they were on the same side.

“Then there were artists such as Sickert and people such as Lawrence of Arabia, who I thought was wonderful. But the name which crops up more than almost everyone else’s in the visitors’ book at Chartwell is that of Lord Cherwell—Professor Lindemann, the brilliant Oxford scientist. You couldn’t get close to the Prof, but he was a presence. His food was always a great mystery to us. He was a vegetarian, so Mummy took tremendous trouble cooking him egg dishes, and Sarah and I would sit and watch him picking the yolks out and eating just the whites!

“My parents weren’t social. Their world was a trade world. One lived one’s life by the sitting and rising of the House of Commons. They weren’t part of society—their friends came mainly from politics. Ascot, Goodwood, the London season meant nothing at all to them. And they despised cafe society.”

But surely, I said, the Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII, of whom your father was fond, was very much part of that society? “True,” Lady Soames replied, “but Papa had known him from his youth. There’s a letter he wrote from Balmoral when Edward was only 16 and Papa was First Lord of the Admiralty. He says he asked the prince to come into his study while he was going through his boxes because he felt the young man needed bringing along. He liked him but didn’t participate in his social life.”

The Churchills were soon having family dramas of their own. “The first time I saw my mother cry,” said Lady Soames, “I was absolutely overwhelmed. It had a very painful effect on me. I was 13 and she broke down in floods of tears because Sarah had run off to America to marry Vic Oliver [an Austrian stand-up comedian]. I realised then how much Sarah had hurt them. I’m afraid I didn’t do anything about it. I was just shocked.”

That was only the first of a series of shattering family disappointments and tragedies. Lady Soames was 17 when the war broke out. With Chartwell virtually shut, she found herself living first in Admiralty House, then in Downing Street, and finally at Chequers to which, blazing with indignation, she was “siphoned off during the Blitz.” Still under military age, she worked as a billeting officer for the Women’s Volunteer Services in Aylesbury. “We used to go to houses and ask whether they’d like to have six people from the East End living with them.” She found that terrifying.

Then came one of those brief, evanescent interludes which seemed to blossom during the war. For eight short weeks, she was engaged to Eric, Lord Duncannon, son of the Earl and Countess of Bessborough. “It all happened in the rush of the war,” she recalled. “It looked all right on paper, if you see what I mean—you couldn’t fault it from that point of view.”

Her parents, however, most emphatically did. Clementine said little at first but then persuaded Winston—“who wasn’t actually paying much attention”—to enter the lists against the idea. “They told me I was too young, hadn’t seen enough people and so on.” Although news of the engagement “got around,” it was never actually published.

Then, still only 18, Mary joined up and spent the next five years in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the women’s army. “It was,” she says, “the biggest experience of my life. I was catapulted out of my narrow class background and I was independent.”

Her father believed that anti-aircraft batteries were taking up too many men and that women could easily do a lot of the work, so Mary joined a mixed-sex AA unit in Enfield. She became, first, a sergeant and then a junior officer; and was eventually posted to a battery in Hyde Park, “on the spot where all the pop concerts are held now,” before being sent to Hastings.

“There, we were shooting at flying bombs, which were a relatively easy target. We had two teams and, when you were off duty, you were meant to be getting some sleep. But you couldn’t, the bloody guns were going off all the time, so we used to sit on the cliffs and watch. I was billeted in a house on the front, quite exposed and, on Saturdays, the people next door used to ask if we’d like to have a bath and a fish tea.”

She loved it. “Uniform is a tremendous leveller,” she said. “We all looked the same, lovely girls from Liverpool and country bumpkins like me. If you were an officer, you were a real part of the gun team, not just in charge of the girls’ shoes and ticking them off.”

The only thing she hated was being sent to a new unit. “I knew they’d be saying: ‘Here’s Churchill’s daughter—she won’t be scrubbing any floors!’ You had to start all over again and make the point that you weren’t just there to polish your nails. It was much easier when I was in the ranks. Once you were an officer, it was far more of a struggle to be accepted. I remember my terror whenever I was sent to a new unit.

“On the evenings off, there were always parties and dances, and one had a lot of fun. When I was in the ranks, I had to be back by midnight—23.59 was the magic number—but, when I became an officer, I quite often arrived back at four in the morning, and was back on duty again by nine. There was a very jolly atmosphere.”

When the war ended and Mary was demobbed, civilian life seemed desperately dull by comparison. Her job, “which gave me responsibilities far beyond my years,” had gone. So had her freedom. “Mother didn’t exactly put me back in the schoolroom, there was no curfew as such and I don’t think there were boring rules about night clubs, but she did want to know what I was doing. Like hundreds of thousands of others, I was thoroughly disoriented.”

She did not stay disoriented for long. Within six months of being demobbed, she had become engaged to Christopher Soames, then a young Guards officer. Again, it was not quite what her parents had in mind. Soames came from a family of brewers and had no profession other than the Army. Because his parents had been divorced when he was 11—“which caused quite a commotion in those days”—he had had such an unhappy childhood that, in later years, he did not mention his parents in his *Who’s Who* entry.

“It was all a bit sudden,” admitted Lady Soames. “I don’t suppose we’d seen each other six times

before we got engaged, and we hadn't even met each other's families. Papa took it on the chin, but my mother was more picky. It caused her great worry. She was anxious that we didn't know each other, that we weren't going to be happy." Clementine's anxieties cannot have been lessened by the fact that, in that same year, two of her children—Randolph and Sarah—had been divorced.

As it turned out, she need not have worried about Mary. "Christopher became very ill soon after we married and had to leave the Army, but Papa told him to come and run the farm at Chartwell. We were so happy there. We called it Honeymoon Farm. Children soon started coming—Nicholas in 1948 and then Emma, Jeremy, Charlotte and finally Rupert in 1959—and, of course, Christopher went into politics as MP for Bedford and then parliamentary private secretary to Papa.

"He did very well with my parents, you know. He was very companionable, unlike my father, who was very self-centred and lived life on his own terms. He used to play bezique and backgammon with Mummy for hours. She was never left high and dry by him, as she was when she and Papa went together to the south of France. He'd write all morning, paint all afternoon and gamble all evening, so she took to coming home again once she'd spent a few days there so as not to hurt their hostesses."

Having seen the devastation wrought by her parents' total absorption in politics, Mary decided to give her family higher priority. "I worked like anything in the constituency during term time," she said, "but in the holidays, I hardly went there at all. Christopher would grumble at times—'Your mother would never have left me alone in Bedford like this,' he'd say—but he didn't pressurise me as Papa did Mother. Because of his parents' divorce, he was very pro our children having a cosy, integrated life.

"After Christopher became ambassador in Paris completely unexpected because he wasn't a diplomat—we had four marvellous years in France. I felt I was in the shop, which was very nice, and we got to know both de Gaulle and Pompidou. I'd already met de Gaulle at Chequers but was always alarmed by him because he was rather unbending.

"I got very flustered when I sat next to him once for dinner at the Elysee. He asked what I did in Paris, and I replied that I walked my dog, which was quite a silly remark to have made. But, instead of brushing me off, he bent his great mind to thinking where I should walk my dog. He was very charming. He liked women, you know. That was the first conversation I had with him that could be called cosy." "We also saw something of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. There was a tradition that they dined at the embassy once every year and that the ambassador should pay them a return visit. He was charming to sit next to, he only wanted to talk about England and what was going on there. It was courteous but quite well marked out, if you see what I mean. I'm sure he never regretted what he'd done. The things he regretted were the things he lost out on."

Brussels, where her husband was vice-president of the European Commission, was not such fun, "partly because I wasn't in the shop." Instead, she worked like a beaver writing her mother's life, which duly became a bestseller. Then it was Rhodesia, happy at the time "but not such a bright

scene now. What's happening there is all so unnecessary.”

Lady Soames comforts herself with the thought that “none of our friends there have said: ‘I foresaw Mugabe becoming like this.’” After Christopher died in 1987, she had six happy years as chairman of the board of the National Theater—“the rummest appointment that was ever made.”

Meanwhile, she watched sadly as her brother's and sisters' lives fell apart. Diana committed suicide in 1963, Sarah and Randolph both died young (in 1968 and 1982). “I don't know why I turned out like this while the others had such problems,” she said, “and comparisons are always odious, aren't they? But I do think Nana made a great difference.

“When Diana, Randolph and Sarah were in the nursery stage, governesses came and went, and then, with Mama so engaged, they were sent away to boarding school. Right through my childhood and adolescent life, I had the continuous influence of Nana and, because I was at home all the time, there were chinks when I could be with Mama.

“Randolph was bolshie from the year dot and Diana was very self-willed. Mama and Randolph never got on, which was partly because my beloved papa spoiled him something rotten. That was really a reaction from the cold way his father had treated him, so he over-indulged Randolph dreadfully. It was very unwise and threw Mama into being the ‘No’ factor. She became unstuck with Diana, too. Her closest relationship was with Sarah before she ran off to Vic, but even then there were escapades.

“The only other thing I can think of is that I lived through sterner times in my teenage years, whereas the others didn't have that. The war had a sobering effect on a lot of people.”