

ANNE SEBBA

Ink, Toil, Tears & Sweat

Darling Winston: Forty Years of Letters between
Winston Churchill and His Mother

By David Lough

(Head of Zeus 610pp £30)

Life is not always what we want it to be, but to make the best of it as it is – is the only way of being happy,' Jennie Churchill wrote to her demanding first-born son, Winston, in 1896. A young widow, she was trying to use her influence with Lord Kitchener to enable Winston, as he wanted, to serve in the Egyptian army for two years. But she warned him that she might not be able to pull it off and in any case had doubts as to whether it was the right thing for him. She added that she was sending him £25, with a further £25 to follow. It was all she could afford.

It's a typical letter, mixing practical and philosophical advice, in this entertaining and illuminating collection, which could be read at a gallop or at leisure. As a whole, it is a deeply moving account of a single mother's attempt, with very limited means at her disposal, to do her best for an adored son, who was exposing himself to grave dangers. Under Jennie's guidance and tutelage, Winston, having left school a teenager with an undistinguished academic record, blossomed into a published author and courageous journalist while still in his early twenties. Jennie worked hard as his literary agent, placing his articles and advising on book deals. She also acted as his romantic sounding board when he met Pamela Plowden – 'the most beautiful girl I have ever seen' – and as his ongoing educator. While he was in India, he read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 'a long and delightful companionship', and then asked her to send out volumes of the *Annual Register* and Macaulay's *History of England*.

When Winston was involved in a scandal, which he was appalled to see reported in *Truth*, he told her, 'you must not allow this to go unchallenged as it would be fatal to any future in public life for me ... I leave

matters in your hands.' Winston did not intend to make a career in the army, but simply to make a name for himself and acquire some experience and popularity before embarking on a political career.

There is a sense of great energy in these letters between an exuberant mother and a forceful son, only twenty years apart in age,



Jennie & Winston after Randolph Churchill's death, 1895

who shared many characteristics, including a huge sense of charm and ambition and an extravagant lifestyle. Jennie was forever at one aristocratic country house after another. She also travelled to the Nile, ostensibly to lobby General Kitchener on her son's behalf ('an action which – if ever I have a biographer – will certainly be admired by others') but also to visit a young officer with whom she was enamoured, Major Caryl Ramsden of the Seaforth Highlanders.

Jennie promised that she was talking to lots of people about her son's exploits,

telling him, 'You will get plenty of kudos ... I will see that you do darling boy.' But Winston wanted more. 'Now do stir up all your influence ... Don't be afraid of trying every line of attack ... You have so much more power.' On one occasion he wrote to her, 'You might arrange one or two dinners – and get me a few invitations. I want to see people and to get about!'

Kudos is not enough to live on and the need for money became an overwhelming driver for mother and son, especially once it became clear that the Churchills, in 1896, had been victims of a fraud. Both turned to the pen as a source of income. Winston commented wryly in 1897, 'When I come back from Turkey I hope to have material enough for a book – so indispensable nowadays to write a book. If you don't you expose yourself to dangerous notoriety. The man who has travelled and never written a book! Shocking!'

Far more shocking, however, was Jennie's engagement to George Cornwallis-West, a man twenty years younger than her, in 1899. Yet Winston promised, 'Whatever you may do or wish to do, I shall support you in every way.'

In my 2007 biography of Jennie, I argued that those who claimed she was distant and uncaring had failed to recognise that she was the mother Winston needed. Admittedly, as these letters show, she might not have visited him often enough during his schooldays. But, as soon as his brilliant if volatile father, Lord Randolph Churchill, died, Jennie fully engaged in the task of promoting Winston, assuring him that, from then on, 'all my political ambitions shall be centred in you.' Jennie and Winston had an intense relationship of mutual support and understanding until the day she died, aged sixty-seven, in June 1921, following an accident.

'I don't think much of a woman whose children dislike her,' Jennie wrote in 1896 about Georgina Ward, dowager Countess of Dudley. These letters, edited and annotated with an admirable light touch by David Lough, prove why that was a fate never likely to befall Jennie Churchill.

To order this book from the Literary Review Bookshop, see page 31.