SALISBURY

Victorian Titan

Winner of the Wolfson History Prize
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Award for Non-Fiction

By the same author

'The Holy Fox': A Life of Lord Halifax
Eminent Churchillians
The Aachen Memorandum

SALISBURY

Victorian Titan

Andrew Roberts

PHOENIX

To Margaret Thatcher
Thrice-elected '*illiberal* Tory'

A PHOENIX PAPERBACK

First published in Great Britain by
Weidenfeld & Nicolson in 1999
This paperback edition published in 2000 by Phoenix,
an imprint of Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

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

ISBN 0 75381 091 3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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The Legacy

'Whatever happens will be for the worse, and therefore it is in our interest that
as little should happen as possible.'

'It's difficult enough to go around doing what is right
without going around trying to do good.'

'Hostility to Radicalism, incessant, implacable hostility,
is the essential definition of Conservatism.'

'The use of Conservatism was to delay changes 'till they became harmless.'

In his seventy-three-page review of a biography of Lord Castlereagh in January 1862, Salisbury had written with ironic satisfaction of 'the just Nemesis which generally decrees that partisans shall be forced to do in office precisely that which they most loudly decried in opposition'. Salisbury's own career abounds with such contradictions, and the sacrifices principle must occasionally make to power.

Here is a man who denounced the arms race but inaugurated the Two-Power Naval Standard; a paternalist landowner who was also a free-market ideologue; a High Tory who sat at the same Cabinet table as Joseph Chamberlain; a leader of 'the stupidest party' who reviewed works of German philosophy and lectured at Oxford on Evolution; someone who feared change, yet eagerly embraced electric lighting, telephones, automobiles and telegraphy; a supporter of the right of a minority of Americans to secede from a Union, but not a majority of Irishmen; a believer in small government who created new Whitehall departments; the denouncer of Robert Lowe for tampering with Blue Books in the Education department, who then happily embroidered them himself once at the Foreign Office; a statesman who professed outrage at the deposing of a Bulgarian prince, yet who himself plotted to oust an Amir, a Khedive and a Sultan.

Here is also a man who mocked pageantry, yet oversaw Lytton's and

Curzon's Delhi Durbars and the Golden and Diamond Jubilees; who opposed the invasion of Egypt, yet never evacuated it; who spoke for the squirearchy, yet introduced County Councils; who loathed Eton, yet sent his children there; who fought the Boer War over the very franchise rights he had resigned rather than extend to his fellow-countrymen. Here is a peace-monger who believed in low taxation but presided over a war that cost £233 million; an opponent of proconsular 'prodigal sons' who appointed Lytton to India and Milner to the Cape; a supporter of giving women the franchise but not a university education.

Salisbury opposed Lord John Russell's bullying gunboat diplomacy, yet practised it himself against Spain, Greece and Portugal. He believed in economic non-intervention, but agreed to bail out Barings. He criticised Palmerston's nepotism and jobbery, and appointed so many members of his own family to his Government that it was nicknamed the 'Hotel Cecil'. He declared parliamentary 'count-outs' were inimical to free speech, and then employed the clôture. He wrote movingly about the ill-treatment of women and children during the American Civil War, yet was Prime Minister when concentration camps were constructed in South Africa. He condemned 'race arrogance', but stated that no black man could sit at Westminster. He denounced Gladstone's Irish Land Acts as crimes against the sanctity of property, and led a Unionist Government which passed four comprehensive measures of its own. He leaked Cabinet discussions in 1867, yet helped force Lord Derby out of the Foreign Office for leaking them in 1878.

Salisbury opposed British interference in the internal affairs of foreign countries, yet went to Constantinople to try to force reforms on the Sultan. He spoke up for two-member constituencies as a bulwark for minorities at the time of the Second Reform Act, yet was instrumental in virtually abolishing them in the Third. He wanted to partition the Ottoman Empire, yet was ready to go to war for its integrity. He described nonconformist chapels as 'objectionable buildings', yet donated land for the erection of one at Hatfield. He despised Jingoism, yet was Prime Minister during the Diamond Jubilee, Mafeking Night and the 'Khaki' Election, its three most extreme manifestations. 'Too honest a Tory for his Party and his time', he lied to the House of Lords over the *Globe*'s revelations in 1878, encouraged Carnarvon not to tell the whole truth about his interview with Parnell, and very likely helped Lord Arthur Somerset evade the law by skipping the country.

Salisbury's detractors of course ascribe these many paradoxes and contradictions to simple hypocrisy, but in fact they were the result of three overlapping phenomena. The first was the maturing of his opinions from the rigid, ideological, sometimes reactionary High Toryism of his twenties and thirties into the more empirical High Toryism which emerged after his 1867 resignation. He never reneged on his earlier

beliefs, but he did recognise how some subtlety and flexibility were required to promote them. If he was to achieve anything for his country and class, he would have to temper his *Saturday Review* prejudices with the pragmatism of the practical minister. They nevertheless remained the foundation of his principles for the whole of his career; they were the lodestar by which he was guided, even if, after 1867, he permitted himself more room to tack as political circumstances dictated.

The second major factor was that after 1886, when the Liberal Unionists entered his *de facto* coalition, and especially after 1895 when they came in *de jure*, he had to make compromises with his political allies. In accommodating Hartington and Chamberlain, a certain amount of watering-down of his Tory policy was inevitable, but it proved a price well worth paying, inaugurating almost two decades of Unionist domination. 'It is one of the most painful disenchantments of office to find how much of one's discretion has been mortgaged by one's predecessors,' Salisbury told the Duke of Buckingham, the Governor of Madras, in 1878, and in his time allies performed an identical function.

The third factor was the 'vast, impersonal forces' of History, which were making Salisbury's world increasingly difficult to sustain, but against which he fought an impressive lifelong rearguard action. Urbanisation, industrialisation, the rise of middle-class self-confidence, massive population growth, syndicalisation, the collapse of land prices and revenues, all led to the loosening of aristocratic political control as the nineteenth century progressed, and all were out of his power significantly to affect, let alone to control. The position of the aristocracy in late-Victorian Britain was rather like that of a family firm which has gone public; although the turnover, profits and market capitalisation of the company had increased enormously, their influence on the future direction had diminished proportionately.

Salisbury has collected a myriad of detractors, although he has also attracted praise from some unlikely quarters. Shortly before he died, Clement Attlee was invited to Chequers by Harold Wilson and asked whom he thought the best Prime Minister of his lifetime. Without hesitation Attlee replied 'Salisbury.' Overall, however, the historical verdict has so far been ungenerous. His inaction in the 1895–6 Armenian crisis has even been described as 'one of the most discreditable blunders ever committed by an Anglo-Saxon statesman'. (In fact, the Cabinet and Admiralty had prevented Salisbury from taking the very active measures he had wanted.) The socialist leader Henry Hyndman called Salisbury's policy 'quite Venetian in its subtletly and patriotic unscrupulousness', which he would not necessarily have taken as an insult.

The Irish MP T.P. O'Connor said that Salisbury was a 'not very attractive personality, for he is lumbering, uncouth, ponderous beyond the ordinary, black in visage, pale in cheek, heavy and awkward in frame; he strikes one as a very rough piece of Nature's carving – not in the least like the delicate and more refined material out of which we suppose aristocrats to be composed'. Once again this analysis would hardly have discomposed the Great Marquess, who had a rhinocerine hide for criticism. When in 1869 he was attacked for speaking of Gladstone's 'arrogant will', he expressed himself puzzled to Canon MacColl: 'If anyone said of me that I had an arrogant will I do not think I should regard it as a severe censure.'

The *Morning Post* called him 'The Prime Minister of Despair' and a *Times Literary Supplement* review of his biography described him as 'strange, profound, aloof, unlovable' with a 'slightly brutal streak in his character'. Historians have complained that his achievements were generally negative, in the sense that they tended to prevent change both at home and abroad. There is more than a little truth in all these analyses, nor would he have particularly dissented from the historian Paul Smith's opinion that 'In an age of democratic politics centred largely on social issues, Salisbury seems to belong to a distant and antipathetic tradition, the last grand aristocratic figure of a political system that died with Victoria, or even before, a great whale irretrievably beached on the receding shore of the nineteenth century.' For a man who showed unconcealed pleasure when he overheard a workman in Pall Mall saying, 'There goes the Old Buffer!', this would have sounded almost like praise and fitted in perfectly with his fatalistic streak.[1]

Then there are the historians who complain that Salisbury was 'too much obsessed with Great Power Politics', left Britain dangerously isolated, never developed an overarching doctrine, failed to answer the Irish Question, left no distinctive political legacy and 'made no bid for the credit of a settled plan' in international relations. In most cases, of course, Salisbury is being accused of failing to do something he thought either undesirable or impossible. To blame a self-proclaimed fatalist and empiricist for not imposing ideological solutions is self-evidently absurd. Salisbury's legacy lies in what he said and did; all overarching political programmes and doctrines he regarded as dangerous cant. As he himself said of Palmerston's statesmanship, the 'most difficult and most salutary [thing] for Parliament to do' was often 'to do nothing'. It was only with the greatest difficulty that his colleagues persuaded him even to issue general election manifestos.

After reading the first two of Gwendolen's four-volume biography of Salisbury, the socialist intellectual Harold Laski thought him: 'not quite honest, a rasping tongue, all the absence of manners of the English country gentleman, just enough scholarship to be a spider among flies, and a sufficient income to appear generous to poor relations'. This is about as spiteful and unfair as the criticism has got, except perhaps from

his own Iago, his brother Eustace, whose fraternal vitriol in his *Apologia* included the accusation that Salisbury looked 'upon politics as a question of personal ambition, rather than of principles'.

Even Salisbury's principled 1867 stand against the advent of mass democracy has been belittled by one of his former MPs, Alfred Baumann, who wrote in 1927 that 'there was no question of principle involved; it was merely a matter of detail, of clauses and schedules'. The assumption that great principles cannot be contained in a Bill's clauses and schedules must cast doubt on Baumann's own worth as a parliamentarian. The Second Reform Act ushered in the modern democratic era, and Salisbury's stand against it was, in the context of the time, as logical and principled as it was ultimately doomed. The case for the prosecution can conclude with the remark of the Duchess of Devonshire to Herbert Asquith's wife Margot: 'We both married angels; when Hartington dies he will go straight to Heaven.' At this she pointed her finger up above her head. 'And when Mr Asquith dies he will go straight there too.' She then turned her finger downwards with a diving movement to the floor and beyond – 'Not so Lord Salisbury.'[2]

'In men of genius, as a rule, the imagination or the passions are too strongly developed to suffer them to reach the highest standard of practical statesmanship,' wrote Salisbury in his *Quarterly Review* essay on his hero Lord Castlereagh. 'They follow some poetical ideal, they are under the spell of some fascinating chapter of past history, they are the slaves of some talismanic phrase which their generation has taken up, or they have made for themselves a system to which all men and all circumstances must be bent.' Salisbury's distinctive philosophy of Toryism was based on the opposite creed; one that viewed with intense scepticism any concept of liberty not steeped in precedent, which considered the inherent or inalienable rights of peoples or nations as 'a folly and chimera', and secular schemes for the improvement of Mankind as hopelessly utopian. Despairing of projects based upon lofty ideals rather than practical, day-to-day experience, Salisbury has been criticised for not providing any spiritual 'uplift'. But once again he believed the duty of statesmen was to provide good governance and to leave morality and 'uplift' to the Church. 'When great men get drunk with a theory,' he wrote about political theorists, 'it is the little men who have the headache.' The bloody experience of much of the twentieth century has more than borne him out.

'All absolute dogmas in human affairs are a mistake,' Salisbury told Lytton in September 1877 over the question of interfering with India's trade to relieve famine. 'Trade finds its level in the long run – but the

Hindu starves in a very short run.' Salisbury's instinctive distrust of all metaphysics not covered by Anglican doctrine led him to denounce the 'cloudy metaphysical speculations' of German philosophers, and state that 'all the civilisation of modern Europe is due to the spirit of scepticism'. His scientific experiments underlined this trust in the rational and quantifiable; dewy-eyed romance played no part in his Toryism, as it did in that of Bolingbroke, Burke or Beaconsfield.

'Nothing can be certain 'till it happens' was one of his watchwords. 'One of the difficulties about great thinkers is that they so often think wrong' was another. 'A gram of experience is worth a ton of theory' was yet another. Once when asked a particularly hypothetical question by his family, he answered: 'I will wait until I *am* a tiger!'[3] Writing to Sanderson about Crete in 1897, he said of a proposed scheme: 'It is better to deal with it practically not theoretically: that is, to avoid laying down any doctrine, but to let things in practice go on as they are.' He took this Tory empiricism to its logical conclusion when he even denied the existence of 'policy'.

'I do not think that the charge of being socialistic will have any weight with the House of Commons,' Salisbury told a correspondent about encouraging Irish emigration to southern Africa in 1887. 'If it is convinced that the measure is likely to answer, it never troubles itself about the school of thought from which the measure is drawn.' Lord Wemyss's accusation that his housing proposals were collectivist also cut little ice. Such pragmatism came to an apogee when he discussed with Lady Rayleigh how to stop the Athanasian Creed being read out in churches, which, although he subscribed to it himself, he believed alienated many of the cultivated, university-educated people whom the Church needed to retain. 'Why can't it be sung?' was Salisbury's solution. 'That way no-one would know what it was about!'[4]

Salisbury's critics were right when they accused him of habitually cutting corners. He was contemptuous of rules and, as the *Globe* incident in 1878 showed, perfectly willing to lie in what he regarded as the national interest. Frederick Dolman, the editor of the *Junior Liberal Review*, was only slightly exaggerating when in a pamphlet in 1884 he accused Salisbury of being 'manifestly deficient of the slightest appreciation of the most elementary of the political ethics'. In his struggle to protect the privileges of Church and property, Salisbury felt that with democracy increasingly stacking the odds against them, every weapon at hand was permissible, and the invention of a few new ones essential.

The key to Salisbury's philosophy of Toryism was his innate fatalism, itself partly a factor of his depression. 'I have for so many years entertained a firm conviction that we were going to the dogs that I have got to be quite accustomed to the expectation,' he wrote to Henry Acland a week before Disraeli introduced his Second Reform Bill. Walking with

Gwendolen on a mountain in the French Riviera one summer's day, Salisbury morbidly contemplated the end of civil society. His daughter recalled how his voice and manner 'grew heavily oppressed, and his eyes – looking out upon the sunlit sea beneath him – seemed to be filled with a vision of gloom as he dwelt with unforgettable emphasis on the tragedy which would be involved in such a catastrophe'. This was no pose, but the comprehensible reaction of a rich, devoutly Anglican aristocrat in an age of increasing democratisation, atheism and secularisation, moreover someone who had witnessed human nature in unpleasant forms, both at school and in the settler colonies. He was a congenital depressive, and an Englishman – he always described himself as English rather than British – whose country's power had waxed so much that he knew it could only now wane.

It was not all pessimism; there was a healthy admixture of realism too. Just over a decade after his death, the reversal of his non-alignment policy led to British involvement in an Armageddon which cost the lives of five of his nine beloved grandsons, including the nineteen-year-old George who as a young boy had lit the Mafeking bonfire. The secularisation of modern society would also have justified his 'vision of gloom'. Holding out little hope for mankind meant he was rarely disappointed in it, but occasionally he could provide some 'uplift', as when he wrote this moral in a tenant's autograph album: 'Confidence of success is almost success, and obstacles often fall by themselves before a determination to overcome them.'

In no area was his fatalism more pronounced than in the assumption that democracy would eventually lead to the extinction of the power and wealth of his own class. In attempting to channel and civilise the forces of democracy in the thirty-five years after the Second Reform Act, Salisbury did an astonishingly successful job, especially in helping so to draft the 1884 Reform Act that it worked to the Conservatives' eventual advantage. Although he denied the very existence of 'the people', saying that they 'as an acting, deciding, accessible authority are a myth', he always feared them *en masse* because 'an emotion will shoot electrically through a crowd which might have appealed to each man by himself in vain'. The emotion he most feared was envy, which he thought would eventually lead to the many imposing a confiscatory taxation regime upon the few. He regarded social reforms such as free elementary education and old age pensions as the ever-increasing danegeld that the haves were forced to pay the have-nots in order to protect their property rights and stave off revolution.

'We are on an inclined plane leading from the position of Lord Hartington to that of Mr Chamberlain and so on to the depths over which [the socialist] Mr Henry George rules supreme,' Salisbury warned in a classic thin-end-of-the-wedge speech in Dorchester in January 1884.

Ten years later, he likened Henry George's and Keir Hardie's demands for land nationalisation to 'a Plantagenet or Tudor sovereign's views on the subject of benevolences, or a Highland chief's notions as to his neighbour's cattle'. Socialism for him was merely a form of legalised theft. This view has since been described as 'unreasoning' and 'dangerous', but it was sincerely held.[5] 'If English workers are promised an elysium of high wages and little work, as a result of pillaging other classes in the community,' Salisbury wrote in the *Quarterly Review*, 'it would be too much to expect that they should be keen-sighted enough to see through the delusion and refuse the tempting bait.' Salisbury took it for granted that the proletarianisation of British culture and society would inevitably follow.

'I reckon myself as no higher in the scale of things than a policeman,' he said of his political rôle, 'whose utility would be gone if the workers of mischief disappeared.' The primary vehicle through which the policeman would defeat the mischief-workers had to be the Conservative Party, an institution officially born in the same year as Salisbury himself. Although he carefully avoided last ditches after 1867, Salisbury engaged in a lifelong struggle against what he saw as the forces of atheism and political progressivism, becoming a master of patient obstructionism. He preferred 'careful and tentative reform' to 'ethereal doctrines and high-flying theories', and only accepted change when it was forced upon him or when, as with free education and County Councils, the Radicals threatened to pass something more comprehensive. He intensely disliked doing it, and subsequently blamed those two measures for his defeat in the 1892 general election. That year he told Lady Rayleigh: 'The use of Conservatism was to delay changes 'till they became harmless.'[6]

This was as true in foreign affairs as in domestic politics. Writing to Dufferin about the defence of Persia in December 1879, Salisbury said that 'Whatever happens will be for the worse, and therefore it is in our interest that as little should happen as possible.' He wanted 'to provide halting places where the process of change may rest awhile'. With the British Empire's global position, Salisbury was acutely conscious of the envy it excited and the dangers it faced, an attitude which precluded him from feeling the imperial hubris that gripped so many of his contemporaries. It was this profound sense that the Empire must avoid fighting a major continental war which led Salisbury to adopt his policy of non-aligned but full engagement with the Great Powers. Together he and Bismarck appreciated the dangers of war; it was only when both men had quitted the scene that the Great European Peace of 1871–1914 came to an end.

Even as he took High Toryism to its loftiest altitudes, Salisbury was keen not to seem to oppose all change *per se*. 'The axioms of the last age

are the fallacies of the present,' he wrote, 'the principles which save one generation may be the ruin of the next.' As he told the Primrose League in November 1888, 'Remember that the problems of the age are changing as we live, that the things for which we fought when we were young no longer remain to be fought about when we are old.' Salisbury instinctively disliked any political change that was not gradual, consensual and also, if possible, compensatory to the losers. In December 1883, he told a Watford audience that:

> My idea of a Conservative policy, though I do not exclude the necessity of organic change when that necessity is clearly proved, is to entertain those measures which are directly for the benefit of the nation, and not to be perpetually improving the machine by which these measures are to be passed.

He went further, saying that although organic change 'is sometimes inevitable, we regard it as an evil, and we do not desire to give it any assistance we can avoid ... it occupies time and energies which are wanted for other purposes'.[7]

Salisbury believed that everything 'respectable and aristocratic' was 'singularly impatient of change', and he saw no reason to apostatise. He took great solace from the study of history, and in particular, as Gwendolen recorded, he enjoyed:

> The proved futility of theorists to whatever school of thought they might belong; the worthlessness of forecasts based on logical calculation; the evil which has repeatedly been wrought by the best intended policies; the hopeless incongruity between aim and result which dominates history.

This sometimes even led him, as in his estimation of the Paris Commune, to conclude that sometimes the 'perils of change are so great, the promise of the most hopeful theories is so often deceptive, that it is frequently the wiser part to uphold the existing state of things, if it can be done, even though in point of argument it should be utterly indefensible'.[8] In other words, there were circumstances in which it was best to leave ill alone, where an attempt at reform, however well meaning, will only make matters worse.

Paul Smith has written of Salisbury's political philosophy that 'It is an intellectual and sophisticated Toryism which employs an apparatus of close empirical reasoning to support the conclusions at which it is programmed by instinctive predilection to arrive.... It is, in short, Toryism for the clever man.' As Salisbury wrote in his classic attack on democracy in the *Quarterly Review* in July 1861, welcoming the implosion of the 'ideal republic' across the Atlantic: 'It is only in the wreck of all ideals, and the collapse of all fantastic hopes, that sober cynical Truth can make her prosaic accents heard.' His warnings about both the

Paris Commune and German hyper-nationalism, the forerunners of the two creeds which have wrought so much misery in the twentieth century, implies that Salisburyian Toryism had something to say to ages other than his own.

Nowhere did his sense of restraint, scepticism and utilitarianism serve Salisbury better than in his foreign policy. 'A diplomatist's glory is the most ephemeral of all forms of that transient reward,' he wrote in his Castlereagh essay. 'There is nothing in the achievement which appeals to the imagination: nothing which art can illustrate, or tradition retain, or history portray.' Salisbury's own realism allowed him to distinguish between the chimera and cant so often present in diplomacy, and as one contemporary foreign critic complained, 'He never in his life said a flattering thing without adding a pin-prick.'

Salisbury did not believe in going too deeply into hypothetical situations during negotiations. When the Foreign Office was discussing the outlines of an African deal with Germany in July 1895, he told Sanderson: 'I have some doubt of the policy of discussing disagreeable contingencies which are purely hypothetical. It reminds me of the anxious couple who broke off their intended marriage, because they could not agree as to the second name of their (future) third son.' The belief that the British Empire could coexist peacefully with its neighbours without needing to align itself with one or other of the Great Power blocs expired with Salisbury. The Entente Cordiale with France was concluded barely a year after his death, thereby linking British fortunes to those of a country which turned out to be in faster relative decline during the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the all-important military sphere, than even Britain herself.

Salisbury was left utterly cold by the emotional antipathies and sympathies which countries like Greece, France or Turkey could evoke in his compatriots. It was a strength in his diplomacy that, except for his bias against America as the home of democracy and plutocracy, he felt no particular predilection for or against the various foreign Powers. He lived for part of the year in France, read and spoke fluent German, and wished for friendship with Russia, but he always applied cold logic to Britain's relations with all of them, treating them as rivals and potential enemies to be dealt with on the strictly rational precepts of strategy and *Realpolitik*. Hatzfeldt was right when he reported to Berlin that Salisbury 'is a man who in general cherishes no sympathies for any other nation, and in the transaction of business is moved by purely English considerations'.

In his four Foreign Secretaryships, Salisbury scored many notable

triumphs with relatively few reverses. Sir Edward Grey later put this down to his natural willingness to compromise, 'the caution which springs from strength'. Yet no part of the world where Salisbury was criticised for making concessions – Madagascar, Samoa, northern China, Panama, Venezuela, Heligoland, Siam, Alaska, Timor, the Sahara – was ever likely to have been important to the development of the British Empire. As Cecil Rhodes himself remarked, Salisbury pegged out Britain's imperial ground carefully, and only that which was left over was negotiable. The man whom Hanotaux called the '*tête dominante*' of post-Bismarckian European statesmen was largely responsible for partitioning Africa, usually through bilateral agreements, without occasioning a European conflict. When the situation required toughness however, as at Fashoda, he was perfectly ready to fight.

Salisbury presided over many crises which could easily have led to a general European conflagration, especially in the Balkans and the Near East, and he worked hard to ensure that none did. Part of his secret lay in his preternatural patience. '*Sero sed serio*' certainly applied to this Cecil. As the Khalifa and Kruger discovered, his vengeance might have been long awaited, but once he was ready it came in earnest. When he did fight a major war, as in the Sudan and South Africa, it was only after he had carefully manoeuvred Britain into a position where she could act without any outside interference. In the course of his premierships he added the Central and East African Protectorates, Nigeria, New Guinea, Rhodesia, Upper Burma, Wei-hai-wei, Zanzibar and Pemba, the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony to the dominion of the British Crown, comprising over two and a half million square miles and over forty-four million inhabitants (not including the Anglo-Egyptian condominium in the Sudan). All this despite the fact that he was never a doctrinaire imperialist.[9]

'No tinge of that enthusiastic temper which leads men to overhunt a beaten enemy, to drive a good cause to excess, to swear allegiance to a formula, or to pursue an impracticable ideal, ever threw its shadow upon Lord Castlereagh's serene, impassive intelligence.' The same can be said of the author as of his subject; the *Pax Salisburiana* blessed Europe between his joining the Foreign Office in 1878 and his leaving office in 1902. Of course, in a diplomatic career of over two decades there were occasional setbacks and errors. His high hopes for reform in Asiatic Turkey, so confidently proclaimed on his return from Berlin in 1878, were never implemented, for example. Yet, if as his critics suggest he was 'obsessed' with Great Power politics, it was only because it was a war against another Great Power, or combination of them, which posed the greatest danger to Britain. Small wars were 'mere surf' to him; it was the great conflict between the European Powers which he foresaw, feared and was determined to avoid.

When Salisbury privately recommended the partition of Turkey to the Kaiser at Cowes and to the Tsar at Balmoral, he was turned down both times. If one of the remarkable things about the First World War is that it did not break out earlier, Salisbury is largely responsible for that achievement. That no great Anglo-Russian conflict took place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as seemed probable when Salisbury sat down to pen his famous April 1878 Circular, especially considering the many areas where the two other empires impinged on one another, is also largely down to him. An Anglo-French war was also at times a distinct possibility, but Salisbury knew how and when to 'turn away wrath'.

For all the early defeats of the Boer War, fewer British troops fell in the thirty-one months of that conflict than in the first thirty-one minutes of the Somme Offensive. Counterfactual history can never be much more than a diverting parlour game, but if Salisbury had had Gladstone's political longevity and had also stayed in office until he was eighty-four, he would have been Prime Minister in 1914. Could he have prevented the Great War from breaking out? His 'Diplomaticus' attempt in 1889 to escape from the 1839 guarantee to Belgium suggests that he saw the dangers posed by a German Schlieffen Plan even before it was drawn up. He certainly recognised the dangers to peace personified in Kaiser Wilhelm II.[10] We cannot know, but must suspect, that Salisbury would have made more strenuous efforts to prevent the cataclysm.

In a critique written in March 1902 about the proposed alliance with Japan, Salisbury cast doubt on whether Britain would go to war with Germany if she violated Belgian sovereignty, concluding that 'our treaty obligations will follow our national inclinations and not precede them'. By 1914, of course, the German Imperial Navy had become the great threat, and Salisbury's strictures about the protection of the Scheldt would have applied as directly to the Kaiser's navy as it had to that of Napoleon III. Yet it is hard not to agree with Algernon Cecil, Salisbury's nephew, that the 1914 crisis would have been dealt with very differently by his uncle than it was by the Asquith Government:

> A private letter to Berlin might have either indicated at what point Austrian polemics must encounter British opposition; a private letter to St Petersburg have conveyed how long mobilisation must be restrained before the claims of Russian prestige could count upon British support; and a Circular terminating in a Congress, with the British Foreign Secretary this time as honest broker, have sufficed to reconcile the claims of peace and honour for another quarter of a century.

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Nowhere has Salisbury's legacy been more virulently condemned than over Ireland. 'Those who frustrated Gladstone in 1886 and for years afterwards', one reviewer wrote in *The Times Literary Supplement* after twenty-nine people were killed in a bomb blast in 1998, 'are in a real sense the authors of the trail of blood that leads all the way to the streets of Omagh.' This is as contentious as it is hypothetical. What can be said with relative certainty is that had an unpartitioned Ireland won Home Rule, any Dublin legislature would have soon been faced with a full-scale revolt in the north. As Randolph Churchill had warned in May 1886: 'Ulster will fight; Ulster will be right,' and a civil war would probably have resulted in far more bloodshed than was ever seen in the Easter Rising, or even during the Troubles. The Duke of Cambridge, the Commander-in-Chief of the British army, openly intimated that it would under no circumstances put down a Protestant revolt in Ulster against Irish Home Rule.

Because it never happened we cannot ascertain the precise lengths to which the Ulstermen would have been willing to go in 1886. Certainly, by 1912, three-quarters of all Ulster Protestants over the age of fifteen had signed a covenant to use 'all means which may be found necessary to defeat Home Rule', and 90,000 men joined the Ulster Volunteer Force the following year. Perhaps Salisbury prevented a civil war; we cannot know. From a selfish strategic point of view, had a self-governing Ireland stayed neutral in the First World War – as she did in the Second – the 170,000 Irishmen who fought against the Kaiser in the British army would probably not have served.

In the May 1904 Commons debate over the erection of a memorial to Salisbury near the west door of Westminster Abbey, the Irish Nationalist leader John Redmond struck a discordant note amongst all the eulogies when he described Salisbury as 'a man who all through his career was the consistent and the vehement opponent of every extension of the liberties of the Irish people'. This can hardly be denied. Yet Salisbury's major argument, that Home Rule would 'be a sentence of exile or ruin' for the Protestant minority in the south of Ireland, was later proved accurate in almost every detail. Between 1911 and 1926, but especially after the withdrawal of the British army and disbandment of the Royal Irish Constabulary in early 1922, the twenty-six counties that became the Irish Free State witnessed the exodus of no less than 34 per cent of their Protestant population. As the historian of these terrible events attests, the Protestants were 'menaced, boycotted, frightened, plundered or deprived of their land'.

This horrific outbreak of ethnic cleansing has been described as 'a

transformation as thorough as those of the Cromwellian plantations, or the Williamite confiscations', and represents the only post-seventeenth-century mass displacement of any native group in the British Isles. Protestant homes, churches and public buildings were burnt down, as were many great houses, such as Palmerston in County Kildare, Castle Boro in County Wexford and Desart Court in County Kilkenny. Massacres took place, for example fourteen Protestants were killed in West Cork on a single day in April 1922, and there was a flood of refugees. The Free State Government was not directly involved, but it was just such an outbreak of mass religious and ethnic sectarianism of which Salisbury had warned, and which he halted Home Rule in order to prevent.[11]

Writing to Balfour about a proposal that the mastership of Trinity College, Cambridge, should no longer be confined to clergymen, Salisbury said: 'Intrinsically I doubt the clerical qualification being of much value – but a great number of people cling to it still: and innovations on such a point must not come from us.' Salisbury believed in the political fitness of Radicals proposing radical measures and of Conservatives opposing them. So when historians complain that Salisbury was 'not a Peel' and was thus incapable of the 'imaginative' action of supporting Gladstone's Home Rule policy, believing that if he had, Ireland might have been kept 'permanently within the British connection', they entirely miss the point. Salisbury was proud of not being yet another Tory apostatiser; he exulted in it. He had no wish to be 'imaginative', but merely true to his principles.

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Disraeli said that 'England does not love coalitions', but she liked the Unionist one well enough to entrust it with power for sixteen of the nineteen years after 1886. Somehow Salisbury managed to incorporate High Tories, Whigs, Radical Imperialists, Fair Traders, Tory Democrats, Free Traders, Jingoes, Liberal Unionists and Tariff Reformers in his coalition ministries. He deployed tremendous personal qualities, not least of humour and forbearance, to achieve this, and unlike Gladstone before him or Balfour afterwards, Salisbury was able to keep Chamberlain and Devonshire inside his ministries.

More of a natural rebel than an orthodox Party man, Salisbury had found it hard to understand the anguish felt by the Liberal Unionists over leaving their Party. If the Conservative Party abandoned its principles, he told his family, 'I should walk for the last time down the steps of the Carlton Club without casting a glance of a regret behind me.' Salisbury believed that there was a large penumbra of floating voters amongst the British electorate, whom he told MacColl inhabited 'the

zone of temporary adherents, who fall away in times of rebuke'. Gladstone's messianic Home Rule campaign, undertaken without so much as a word of warning or consultation with his Party, was just such a time. Even when the Liberals did include Home Rule in their election cry, Salisbury refused to accept they had a real mandate for it. 'How can a man give you a clear answer if he only has one answer to give and you ask him ten questions at the same moment?' he asked before the 1895 election campaign got under way. Even after he had won it, he still maintained that 'When the great oracle speaks, we are never quite certain what the great oracle said.'

A believer in small government and minimal public spending (except on armaments), Salisbury did not measure his Government's success by the number of new laws placed on the Statute Book.[12] In the 1900 session, only 174 statutory instruments were passed by Parliament. 'There is no evidence upon which he can be credited with the paternity of any measure introduced while he was Prime Minister,' boasted Gwendolen of her father's time in office.[13] When the leading theatre managers visited Salisbury to ask for a special government department for the arts to be set up, he refused because it would open up 'an indefinite vista of expense'. He only agreed to create the Scottish and Agriculture Departments when it was demonstrated to his satisfaction that there was an overwhelming need for each, and even then he limited them to the smallest possible bureaucracy and powers.

Although Salisbury did not believe his administrations should be judged according to Liberal criteria, they did initiate some social reform. The first factory inspections of adult workers and compulsory accident compensation were introduced under Salisbury, and the problem of working-class housing was eased by his 1885 and 1890 initiatives. Nor did free primary education come as a result of Attlee's Welfare State, but under the most right-wing Tory Prime Minister in modern history. The reason Salisbury did not make more of these achievements was that he knew that, by so doing, he would enter into a 'sordid auction' for votes in which he could never outbid the Left. It would also encourage the advent of what he called 'an age when every man is profoundly sensible of the duty of mending his neighbours' ways'. Salisbury was a devout believer in *noblesse oblige*, as his treatment of the Hatfield tenantry showed, but he also thought that the working man should insure himself against accident and illness. Charity should never, he told an audience when opening a convalescent home near Bradford in October 1877, 'diminish the sense of freedom, independence and self-help which is an essential portion of the character of the British working man'.

Libertarianism was a mainspring of his political thought. 'Sobriety is a very good thing and philanthropy is a very good thing,' he once wrote,

'but freedom is better than either.'[14] When in the last few weeks of his life a measure was discussed to prevent children entering public houses, Salisbury told his family that he 'cannot bear grandmotherly legislation'. The spirit of tyranny, he had warned the Primrose League in May 1889, was usually dressed in the garments of an angel of light:

> It may wear the appearance of some religious movement or pretend to the authority of some great moral effect. But underneath that cloak there is concealed that steady enemy of human liberty – the desire of men, whenever they may grasp a bit of power, to force others to conform their ideas to their own.

Salisbury made a sharp distinction between the general philosophy of Toryism and the short-term practical needs of the Conservative Party. After 1867, he recognised that the interests of the former were not always best realised through the vehicle of the latter. When forced, as over his nephew's Irish Land Act or the campaign for allotments, to choose between Toryism and Conservatism, he unerringly adhered to the former. As his remarks to Milner and others demonstrated, Salisbury was acutely conscious of the Conservative Party's failings, principally its traditional willingness to ditch its principles when the prospect of office beckoned.

'I always associate the names of Gladstone, Beaconsfield and Salisbury as the three giants of the late Victorian era,' a Glamorganshire MP, Sir Alfred Thomas, said in the May 1904 debate. Posterity has not agreed. There was no cult of Salisbury as there was – and to an extent still is – of the other two. Gladstone and Disraeli were glorified in hundreds of commemorative busts and mugs and plates; Salisbury had only two busts and a plate that was misspelt. Plays and films are regularly written featuring Gladstone and Disraeli; Salisbury almost never appears on the screen or boards, and was even portrayed as clean-shaven in a BBC drama about Cecil Rhodes. Questions are set in history examinations about the famous duo, but rarely feature Salisbury's longer period in office. Yet Salisbury was, in A. J. P. Taylor's estimation, 'a character as Dr Johnson was a character and on the same scale'. His wit was the equal of Disraeli's, relying on high irony rather than mere paradox.

The reason that, despite being Prime Minister for over thirteen and a half years at the height of British imperial prestige, Salisbury has been largely ignored by biographers and school *curricula* alike is that his is seen as an essentially negative message, providing no 'uplift'. He wrote of Castlereagh that he was 'A practical man of the highest order, who yet did not by that fact forfeit his title to be considered a man of genius.' Practical men of the highest order are not necessarily loved, however, especially when they go so far out of their way to avoid being embarrassed by popular applause. There could never be a 'People's Robert' as

Gladstone was 'The People's William'. Salisbury did not believe 'the people' even existed, he despised populist cant, and few apart from his wife ever presumed to use his Christian name. The populace admired and trusted Salisbury, but since he entirely lacked (and despised) the common touch, he could never be taken to their bosom as the other two arch-exhibitionists were. Yet, if Gladstone and Disraeli won the people's hearts, Salisbury won their votes.

What Winston Churchill called Salisbury's 'caustic, far-ranging common sense', allied to an intellect as fine as that of any British Prime Minister and a talent for ruthlessness when the occasion demanded, made him the third triumvir of late-Victorian politics, fully the equal of Gladstone and Disraeli. Together these three men guided the destiny of Great Britain for a third of a century. Salisbury's memorial service might not have attracted the attention of passers-by, and he was never given the mythification accorded to his fellow triumvirs, but History should not be so gullible and inattentive.

Salisbury was a natural leader to whose authority men yielded. He had an entirely self-contained personality. 'With the possible exception of his wife,' recalled Gwendolen, 'I am unable to fix upon any individual whose character or opinion left any trace upon his own.' It helped that, unusually for a Tory leader, Salisbury's place was utterly secure; no one posed a threat to his position at any time after Churchill's fall in 1886. If anything, Salisbury was too successful. His foreign and imperial policy successes unconsiously spawned Jingoism; his 'Khaki' victory in 1900 made all the more painful his nephew's huge defeat five years later. His stifling of the debate over tariff reform meant it erupted with all the more vigour once he had gone. The Taff Vale Judgment so damaged trade unionism that it created a backlash which helped create the Labour Party.

Despite transforming their fortunes, Salisbury is regularly excluded from the Conservative Party's pantheon of heroes. Platform speakers will regularly invoke the legacies of Disraeli and Churchill, Pitt and Peel, Thatcher and Macleod, but they tend to omit Salisbury. Between 1846 and his coming to power in 1885, the Conservatives had only formed one majority government, yet over the next two decades they were in office for all but three years. Salisbury might have despised democracy, but he certainly made it work for the Tories, discovering in the new suburbia and lower-middle classes a whole new area of support for his brand of Tory Unionism. In the course of his career he turned the Party from a disaffected, marginalised pressure group into the popular, natural Party of government. Yet it is to the mantras of Disraeli's 'One Nation' and Randolph Churchill's 'Tory Democracy' that much of the Conservative Party still defers. Some of Disraeli's novels are always in print, while only a small selection of Salisbury's journalism and

speeches has ever been published. Despite being described by the Tory historian Robert Blake as 'the most formidable intellectual figure that the Conservative Party has ever produced', Salisburyian Toryism has found few followers in the modern Party.

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When Gwendolen was writing her father's biography, which ends in 1892 and which was not helped along by her being thrown downstairs by a stone-deaf cook suffering from anæmic hysteria, her brother Hugh advised that 'one must beware of unrelieved panegyric – a thread of criticism greatly adds to the effect'. Salisbury's willingness to cut constitutional corners, his *à la carte* attitude to obeying the law, his occasional ruthlessness and morbidity, the Orissa famine of 1866, his ignorance of and lack of interest in matters military, and of course his inability to prevent terrible fatalities amongst Boer women and children in the concentration camps have all been held against him. 'Africa was created to plague the Foreign Office,' he once said, and the 1899-1902 South African War has certainly plagued his reputation, even though it was not he who started it, but he who succeeded in winning it. Against all these criticisms must be set the testimony of Winston Churchill, that:

> Lord Salisbury, for all his resistance to modern ideas, and perhaps in some way because of it, played a greater part in gathering together the growing strength for a time of trial which few could foresee and none could measure, than any other historic figure that can be cited.

Early in life Salisbury recognised that the institutions he cherished were coming under grave threat. The Established Church, the British Empire, the House of Lords, High Tory and High Church Oxford, Crown prerogatives, the rights of property, the landed aristocracy, the Act of Union – all that he regarded as the very foundations of English governing society – were being subjected to increasing pressures from within and strains from without. In some cases the threats proved exaggerated, in others illusory, the result of his depression. Overall, however, subsequent events have proved his analysis correct; the twentieth century was a disastrous time for the institutions by which Salisbury set store. His was consciously a lifelong rearguard action.

Because, as his daughter Gwendolen wrote, 'he was essentially a fighting animal', Salisbury's response was to fight with every weapon at his disposal. A true Tory to the marrow, he believed in 'hostility to Radicalism, incessant, implacable hostility'. If Radical schemes could not be halted altogether, they might at least be postponed for as long as possible. In the course of fighting this rearguard action he was instru-

mental in bringing into being the modern Conservative Party, equipping it with a creed and an organisation which in the century after his retirement has helped to keep it in office for 70 per cent of the time.

The period of fifty years 'was something in the life of a nation', said young Salisbury when trying to hold up John Bright's abolition of the Church Rate.[15] On 22nd August 1853, he wrote his Stamford constituents an open letter, thanking them for electing him to Parliament for the first time, and pledging to them 'a zealous and undeviating adherence to the Conservative principles which have gained for me the honour of your support'. When he died, fifty years later to the day, the greatest Tory of them all had fully redeemed his pledge.

In 1898, Salisbury divided the world between the 'Living' countries, which were growing in power, unity and prestige, and the 'Dying' ones which, over time, began to forfeit first their integrity and eventually their independence. In the century since his death, his own country has passed from the first category to the second. As Kipling predicted, all the pomp of her imperial yesterday 'is one with Nineveh and Tyre'. His countrymen can, however, take solace from the knowledge that in Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, the great Marquess of Salisbury, they had a leader who brought Britain to a pitch of greatness never seen before or since.