

MY EARLY LIFE by WINSTON CHURCHILL Published 1930

Churchill was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1953 and is considered to be one of the finest prose stylists of the last century. *'My Early Life'* is a precocious autobiography and by many is considered to be his masterpiece. I probably did not appreciate this when I read it aged 13 as a set book in English lessons at school.

It is a zesty cocktail of mixed ingredients, including rehashed newspaper articles, scraps of speechmaking, and many hours of dictated material. The bulk of the book was compiled during the parliamentary holidays in the summer of 1928.

Churchill's first 25 years were like pages torn from a Boy's Own adventure: colonial military service, skirmishes on the North-West Frontier, gruelling night marches, the last great cavalry charge, and a daring escape from a Boer War prison.

My Early Life is, however, more than just a ripping yarn. It is also a surprisingly direct and reflective, even intimate, self-portrait of an extraordinary character during his formative years, full of ironic wit and self-deprecating good humour. Churchill is also candid about his peculiar upbringing as the child of an Anglo-American marriage, his adored but distant mother (Jeanette Jerome), his doomed father (Lord Randolph Churchill), and his own miserable schooling at Harrow. In a famous passage, he confesses his enduring love for Mrs Everest, his nanny. On her death, he wrote: "She had been my dearest and most intimate friend during the whole of the 20 years I had lived."

He also regrets his privileges as a junior member of the Marlborough family, and mourns the failure of his relationship with his father, Lord Randolph: "I would far rather have been apprenticed to a bricklayer's mate, or run errands as a messenger boy, or helped my father to dress the front windows of a grocer's shop. It would have been real... Also I should have got to know my father, which would have been a joy to me."

Churchill is also funny. I only studied Latin for one year at school, but his account of learning the Latin noun *mensa* brings it all back:

"But why 'O table?'" I persisted in genuine curiosity.

"You would use it in speaking to a table."

"But I never do," I blurted out in honest amazement.

"If you are impertinent, you will be punished very severely."

Such was my introduction to the classics, from which, I have been told, many of our cleverest men have derived so much solace and profit.

He is aware that he is also painting "a picture of a vanished age", the *fin-de-siècle* world that would morph into Edwardian England. Additionally, as a man of action, Churchill knows how to tell a story, and make it live with two great set-piece narratives, the Battle of Omdurman (1898) and, in his capture by the Boers in 1899.

Writing about the last pitched battle in living memory:

"It was not like the Great War. Nobody expected to be killed. Here and there in every regiment or battalion, half a dozen, a score, at the worst 30 or 40, would pay the forfeit; but to the great mass of those who took part in the little wars of Britain in those vanished light-hearted days, this was only a sporting element in a splendid game.

But now from the direction of the enemy there came a succession of grisly apparitions: horses spouting blood, struggling on three legs, men staggering on foot, men bleeding from terrible wounds, fish-hook spears stuck right through them, arms and faces cut to pieces, bowels protruding, men gasping, crying, collapsing, expiring."

At the time when he asked a fellow officer what the battle had looked like from afar, Churchill reports that his contemporary replied, dismissively, "It looked like plum duff: brown currants scattered about in a great deal of suet."

When the armoured train on which he was travelling was ambushed by the Boers, he was inevitably seized as a prisoner of war ("the least unfortunate kind of prisoner to be"), and just as inevitably, he managed to escape, having failed to argue for his release as a foreign correspondent. By Christmas Eve, he was back in Durban with a wonderful scoop (his own escape) and quickly found himself "a popular hero", though a few rival newspapers suggested that the Boers would have been entitled to execute him for muddling military and civilian roles.

Back home in England, young Churchill had become a tabloid hero - "I received the warmest of welcomes on returning home" - and a "star turn" in the subsequent khaki election, at which he became a Conservative MP for Oldham. He concludes:

"Events were soon to arise in the fiscal sphere which were to plunge me into new struggles and absorb my thoughts and energies at least until September 1908, when I married and lived happily ever afterwards".

And to end, another Churchillism:

"Young men have often been ruined through owning horses, or through backing horses, but never through riding them; unless of course they break their necks, which, taken at a gallop, is a very good death to die."

CLINGING TO THE WRECKAGE by John Mortimer Published 1982

I had an interesting relationship with John Mortimer in as much as if asked I would say I knew him, but I'm sure if anyone had asked JM about John Ward he would have replied, "Who is he?" When it was first published this book was enthusiastically recommended to me by a solicitor work colleague.

The title comes from a remark made to Mortimer by a sailor who couldn't swim:

"If you ever find yourself in trouble, cling to the wreckage!"

Mortimer comments:

"I thought I'd been taking [that advice] for most of my life".

That kind of understated humour is what we associate with Mortimer. Born just a little too early to be an angry young man but who, according to Emlyn Williams, *"just got into the New Wave as the Tube doors were closing"*.

John Mortimer was renowned for his career as a barrister at London's Old Bailey and his beloved mystery series featuring the character Rumpole. This autobiographical book comprises twenty-six short chapters that blend anecdotal storytelling with reflections on his life, from his childhood in a Sloane Square public school to pivotal moments as an adult, including his involvement in the notable trials of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* in 1968 and *Oz* magazine in 1971. He adopts a unique narrative style, avoiding conventional dates and instead framing his experiences within broader time periods, which allows for a more thematic exploration of his life.

Throughout this memoir, Mortimer vividly portrays the significant influence of his parents, particularly his father's strong presence and the complexities of their relationship. Although blind his father continued his practice at the Bar having his wife read all his briefs and supporting evidence to him.

This book also addresses broader themes such as the English legal system and the pursuit of justice, while maintaining a tone that balances humour with an awareness of life's absurdities. Mortimer's self-deprecating and distinctive literary style create memorable images and insights. Ultimately, *"Clinging to the Wreckage"* marks Mortimer's transition from barrister to writer, providing a poignant commentary on his experiences and the human condition.

He treats his divorce from his first wife Penelope with tactful restraint. He talks of "*the cracks [that] spread across the ceiling*" and turns his discussion to the various therapists he consulted in the "*constant and increasingly hopeless search for a cure*".

His film star daughter Emily once observed: "*Dad always tells a lie if it makes things more interesting.*" And from his childhood onward, Mortimer was also in the habit of removing his powerful spectacles in the face of anything unpleasant, transforming the world into an unthreatening blur.

Mortimer used to fret that he had written good novels, but never a great one, and compared with, say, Pinter and Stoppard, his plays are rarely revived., but *Clinging to the Wreckage* is a masterclass in the art of the memoir.

CHRONICLES (Volume 1) by Bob Dylan Published 2004

As a student in the late 1960s and into the early 1970s I could hardly have failed to be familiar with his records from this time and bought "*Chronicles*" when it was published in 2004. The full title is "*Chronicles – Volume 1*" and it covers Dylan's early career as an unknown folk singer through Greenwich village in 1961 to Woodstock and his breakthrough. There are no volumes 2 or 3 and one doubts that there ever will be

Published 45 years after the event, in this book Bob Dylan is recalling a formative moment in modern popular music: his first encounter with *Bound for Glory*, the autobiography of Woody Guthrie.

In structure and style, Dylan's memoir recalls Guthrie's, but its mood and preoccupations are different. Instead of the open skies and sharp outlines of *Bound for Glory*, *Chronicles* is full of smoky, jumbled interiors. Where Guthrie's book was rumbustious, optimistic, teeming, the disciple's is ruminative, sometimes puzzled, and in the end painfully lonely. *Where Bound for Glory* offered the uplifting tale of Guthrie's discovery of his vocation as a people's singer, *Chronicles* traces a more equivocal journey, one involving loss as well as discovery. The bulk of the book is a captivating evocation of Dylan's first year in New York city (1961), with flashbacks to his boyhood in Minnesota. Here he draws a touching portrait of himself as an ambitious young artist, trembling on the brink of self-realisation. In the middle, there are excursions into two later junctures in the singer's career - studies in alienation, frustration and compromise.

There is much that is not in the book - Nothing about singing at the 1963 march on Washington or going electric at Newport in 1965 or the "Judas!" heckle in Manchester in 1966. Nothing about drugs or sex. Nothing about the fundamentalist Christian phase or about his Jewishness.

However this meandering narrative touches on a fascinating variety of topics - personal, musical, historical. New York at the dawn of the 60s is recreated with warmth and detail. This is the flickering urban landscape of "*Visions of Johanna*", peopled with "*all kinds of characters looking for the inner heat*", mingling in cluttered, carefully observed Greenwich Village apartments. In Dylan's memory New York is "*cold, muffled, mysterious*", a city of epiphanies: "*I passed a horse drawn wagon full of covered flowers, all under a plastic wrap, no driver in sight. The city was full of stuff like that.*"

Chronicles is peppered with vivid sketches of the stars of New York's folk scene: Fred Neill, Cisco Houston, Len Chandler, Paul Clayton, the blues guitarist and Marxist intellectual Dave Van Ronk ("*no puppet strings on him ever*"). John Hammond, the veteran left-winger who produced Dylan's first albums, is recalled with awe: "*There were maybe a thousand kings in the world and he was one of them.*"

The prose is a Dylanesque blend of luminous specifics and myopic vagueness. There is no heavy editorial hand to cut out repetitions, and there are malapropisms and clichés. But the lapses and rough edges are part of the character of this personal memoir.

He finds time for acute appreciations of, among others, Roy Orbison, Ricky Nelson, Harry Belafonte,

Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, *"the bittersweet, lonely, intense world of Harold Arlen"*, composer of *"the cosmic 'Somewhere over the Rainbow'"*. There are also intriguing, off-the-wall observations about figures ranging from Clausewitz and Thucydides to Joe Hill and Balzac

The Bob Dylan of these chapters is a true believer in the religion of folk, which *"exceeded all human understanding, and if it called out to you, you could disappear and be sucked into it."* He claims that the old songs taught him there was nothing new on this earth. History was cyclical: societies emerge, flourish, decline. He seems to read back into his youth some of the attitudes he struck later on. The young man who wrote "Hattie Carroll", "With God on Our Side", "Masters of War" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" was a poet of urgency, and he would have found the fatalism of the later Dylan far too pat. *"I had a primitive way of looking at things and I liked country fair politics,"* he insists. "

At first glance the chapters in the middle of the book appear to concern the making of New Morning (1970) and Oh Mercy (1989). Why not Highway 61 or Blonde on Blonde or Blood on the Tracks or even Love and Theft ? Yet these chapters tell stories most artists avoid telling. Stories of unresolved crisis. Of failure.

The New Morning chapter is framed by Dylan's stiff encounter with the elderly poet Archibald MacLeish, who wants him to compose songs for a play he's written. Dylan respects the poet but cannot communicate with him. Indeed, he seems to have lost the ability to communicate with anyone. Since those sweet, vanished days in Greenwich Village, his life had been transformed. He was not only wildly famous; he was famous as *"the voice of a generation"*, and he hated it. Retiring to rural Woodstock, he finds *"moochers showing up from as far away as California on pilgrimages... rogue radicals looking for the prince of protest".* People *"would stare at me when they saw me, like they'd stare at a shrunken head or a giant jungle rat"*.

The Dylan of the middle chapters is spectral, even to himself. And this is immediately apparent when one returns, in the final chapter, to the heady early days in New York. Here he provides a step-by-step account of the influences that led him to his ferocious synthesis of tradition and individuality. First, there's Guthrie, whose songs had *"the infinite sweep of humanity in them"*. Then there's Brecht and Weill's Pirate Jenny: *"a wild song... a nasty song ... there was no love for people in it."* Then Robert Johnson: *"The stabbing sounds from the guitar could almost break a window."* Wrap it all up with Rimbaud and a beautiful left-wing girlfriend, and *"I was sitting at the gateway"*.

Chronicles ends with Dylan on the verge of his breakthrough. But as we know from early passages in the book this breakthrough will also be a tragic rupture. The pathos of Bob Dylan is that his self was ripped from his grasp at a time when he had barely begun to know it. It's clear that these wounds still smart, that Dylan still reels from the trauma, and that the memory of those early months in New York, those months of discovery, remains precious. *"The folk music scene had been like a paradise that I had to leave."*

his children lived with it all their lives.

Victoria turned out a beauty in the straight-nosed, lantern-jawed Edwardian manner. Her father summoned her to Washington when he was posted there and she was a soaring social success. Returning with him to England, she eventually married in 1890 her first cousin Lionel, her father's heir, becoming Lady Sackville and chatelaine of Knole, the Sackville-West's vast house in Kent. Charming but manipulative and "greedy for gold", Victoria queened it over her siblings. Illegitimacy did not impede her social triumph but the awful shadow left her constantly fearful of poverty and exclusion.

In the 1920s Vita and Virginia Woolf share a passionate and transformative love affair. This decade-long intimacy inspired one of the most famous literary romances of the 20th century and led to Woolf's masterpiece – *Orlando*.

This book is a chronicle of lives wasted, squandered on grievance, vindictiveness, squabbles over money, lengthy and pointless litigation and, above all, dreams of acceptance that were dashed with very public humiliation. Lionel's legacy to his illegitimate children was ambivalence and half-truths – they were never quite sure of exactly who they were. Max, the eldest, even believed himself for a time to be the son of Pepita's long discarded husband, a stout dancer called Juan Antonio de Oliva – and expressed some relief that this would free him from the burden of unrealisable expectations. Surrounded by partisan hangers-on, the siblings ended up fighting each other. Victoria at one point, with terrible irony, was even forced to prove in court her own illegitimacy in order to stop her brother Henry's attempt to claim the Sackville title.

The lives of Pepita's children were spent in the sad shadowlands of the in-betweeners: not quite socially acceptable; not quite English; not quite equipped to look after themselves; not quite anything. **Max** was shipped off to South Africa where he spent the rest of his life working on farms that never made money – and died in poverty. **Flora** married a gold-digger, then in her 40s became an oriental dancer billed as "the honourable Flora Sackville-West". **Amalia**, Vita's "vinegary spinster aunt", was tied like a tin can to Victoria's coat-tails, living with her at Knole in mutual loathing. At 51, she suddenly married a French diplomat and Victoria was furious. When Amalia died in 1945, she was living in a cottage in Hythe, still ranting against her sister and making wild claims to her parenthood. Saddest of all was **Henry** whose halting letters in awkward English make pathetic reading. He spent fruitless years trying to claim his legitimacy as the rightful heir of Knole and ended up committing suicide in a Paris lodging house.

Robert Sackville-West, the current Lord Sackville, is descended from a more sober strain of the family. He has written this book with both objectivity and empathy. But though it is a fascinating picture of a forgotten underside of English aristocratic and public life, it is hard not to find it ultimately a thoroughly melancholy tale. As Max, writing to his estranged sister from South Africa, put it: "It was indeed a load of sorrow and shame that Father left us. How it has eaten into the heart of us all."