A GIFT FROM THE CHURCHILLS

The Primrose League, 1883-2004

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For
John Vincent
from whom I learnt so much
with affection and admiration

British and Irish Politics in the 1880s

When I began postgraduate work as a historian in the late 1960s, John Vincent, then Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge and subsequently Professor of History at the University of Bristol, asked me to work with him on a number of projects. Together we edited and published the following documents:

Herbert Gladstone, Forster and Ireland (1971)
Ireland and Party Politics: An Unpublished Conservative Memoir (1969)
Lord Carlingford's Journal: Reflections of a Cabinet Minister, 1885 (1971)
Lord Spencer on the Phoenix Park Murders (1973)

Our work together culminated in the publication of a major study of party politics and the first Home Rule crisis:

The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain 1885-86 (1974)

I remain forever grateful for this collaboration from which I profited so greatly.

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At the Bodleian Library in Oxford Colin Harris and his colleagues in the Special Collections Reading Rooms made the papers of the Primrose League available to me for study with great kindness and efficiency. I am also grateful to Helen Langley, FRHist.S, Curator of Modern Political Papers at the Bodleian, for guidance based on her expert knowledge of the Primrose League collection. At the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge Andrew Riley did me the greatest service by identifying the documents relating to the Primrose League in the papers of Lord and Lady Randolph Churchill and those of Sir Winston.

Richard Jay and his wife Fionnuala, my wonderful friends in Belfast, have over the years contributed lavishly to my collection of Primrose League memorabilia. John Cope, whose distinguished six-year term as Chairman of the Carlton Club

has just ended, helped me with a number of points. As Chairman he secured two extremely important items of Primrose League regalia for the Club and so ensured their preservation: they are now on permanent display. This book is a by-product of the work on the history of the Carlton Club which he and the Committee of the Club commissioned for publication in 2007.

Alistair Cooke
2 July 2010

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'[Lord Welby] says he thinks the Primrose League was a stroke of genius. I think so too'

(Lady Knightley's Journal, 15 June 1894)

INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Disraeli, first (and last) Earl of Beaconsfield, died on 19 April 1881. On hearing the news, one of his most fervent young Liberal admirers, the 28-year-old Reggie Brett, asked himself the question, 'How will he be judged by posterity?' He entered the answer in his private journal on the same day. 'No more curious figure ever appeared in English political life. He inspired affection, as well as admiration, in his friends and adherents. By all but his bigoted opponents he was held in regard and respect. He was the most magnanimous statesman of our time. He captivated the imagination of the English people, and triumphed over their not unnatural prejudices'.[1] There has never been any doubt about his greatness. But neither Brett nor anyone else in April 1881 foresaw that Disraeli would become the object of a huge posthumous cult, the only one ever inspired by a British politician.

On 20 April 1910 *The Times* carried its usual full report on the events of Primrose Day. 'The 28th anniversary of the death of Lord Beaconsfield was commemorated in London and throughout the country yesterday in the customary manner. Primroses were worn generally, and hundreds of bunches were thrown over the railings of Parliament-square at the foot of the Beaconsfield monument, which, as in past years, was elaborately decorated under the auspices of the Primrose League … The front panel, facing St Margaret's Church, bore a huge shield of primroses around which was worked in violets, the motto "Imperialism and Unity". On the west side in a framework of laurel there was an earl's coronet in red, gold, and silver and the initial "B" formed of violets on a groundwork of primroses. On the east side in a similar framework Lord Beaconsfield's monogram

was shown in mauve, red and yellow flowers on a groundwork of white flowers with a statement worked in violets to the effect that 2,000,000 members have been enrolled in the Primrose League since its formation in 1883'.[2]

Outside London primroses were also prominently displayed once a year on Primrose Day, particularly in Birmingham and Liverpool which also had a great Disraeli monument. 'The statue of Lord Beaconsfield was covered with wreaths and other devices in primroses, and during the day about every other person met in the streets wore primroses. At the mass meeting at night the vast area of Lime-street and the plateau of St George's-hall were packed with a multitude of primrose wearers'.[3]

The extraordinary, unforeseen Disraeli cult was lovingly tended and promoted by its own Primrose votaries whose League in 1910 easily dwarfed all other political organisations, including the Conservative Party itself. Primrose Day saw an outpouring of their faith. Some preferred quiet, fervent celebration. 'For my part', wrote Lord Balcarres, Tory chief whip and a high official in the Primrose League, 'I have never worn primroses on Primrose Day – I carry them next to my heart'.[4] For others it was a poignant family, as well as political, event. Harold Macmillan's father was born on what became Primrose Day: 'the children used always to gather little bunches of primroses for him'.[5] The cult entered into the lives (indeed the souls) of Tories, high and low. And its significance was recognised more generally. Primrose Day was marked as a matter of course in diaries[6] and on calendars, along with the religious festivals and bank holidays. 'Only two other national figures, Guy Fawkes and Charles I (not, for instance, Nelson or Wellington), have entered the calendar in this way'.[7] A proposal that the day of Winston Churchill's death in January 1965 should be marked in some special manner came to nothing.

One of Disraeli's official biographers, G.E. Buckle, wrote in the late 1920s: 'Never had a dead statesman so marked a tribute paid to the persistence of his fame. Even the Great War has not brought the observance of Primrose Day to an end. The statue in Parliament Square is still decorated on that day with "his favourite flower" in honour of a statesman who has been dead nearly fifty years;

still a considerable proportion of the population, male and female, appear in the streets on April 19 wearing bunches or buttonholes of primroses'. Still too there remained the Primrose League, 'a great organisation to popularise the Tory principles of which Beaconsfield was the exponent … [It] has long taken rank as one of the most numerous and efficient organisations in existence'.[8] (By then it had actually passed the very peak of its efficiency and size.)

Once a year members of the League adorned themselves with fresh primrose flowers (a custom for which there was only one parallel: the wearing of oak leaves on 29 May, Oak Apple Day, the anniversary of Charles II's restoration in 1660). At other times they had their badges, clasps, stars and banners to remind them of their cause and their faith. No political organisation in England ever had so much regalia. No order of chivalry possessed a greater variety of ranks and degrees.* In 1888 one of the League's principal officers 'observed rather smugly that Grand Council exercised more patronage than the Lord Chancellor'. Those who mocked the elaborate character and profligate distribution of Primrose honours were told that comments of that kind were almost as bad as deriding 'such honours as the Garter and Victoria Cross'.[9] (Awarded in their tens of thousands, they now command fancy prices on eBay.) The League encouraged comparisons with the historic orders of chivalry by calling its leading members knights and dames, and employing all manner of pseudo-medieval flummery which was so popular in the Victorian age. 'Members were urged to wear badges on all possible occasions, and particularly at election times, and according to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, some knights even attended church in full regalia'.[10] But at Wellington College apparently the boys were forbidden to wear primroses at all because their headmaster was Mr Gladstone's son-in-law. (A wealth of detail about the Primrose honours system can be found on the excellent Primrose League website.)

* The following conveys the flavour of it all. 'The Jubilee Grand Star, instituted in 1887, proved by far the most popular Primrose decoration. It had five points, representing the Empire in the five continents of the world and consisted of five grades, available to different types of membership, at various prices and with different ribbons' (Janet Robb, *The Primrose League 1833-1906* (new edition, AMS Press, New York, 1968), pp 102-3). By 1908 the sale of Primrose honours had raised £65,000 for the League (equivalent to some £4 million today).

All this innocent enjoyment, to which a vast annual programme of social activities also contributed, brought ridicule on the League from its political opponents, and later drew sneers from some historians, but it had the most serious political purpose. The Conservative Party was happy to see Disraeli turned into a great Tory icon, for his worshippers spent long hours voluntarily in its service in constituencies throughout the country. The Carlton Club's role in organisational matters at constituency level had passed to Conservative Central Office, established in 1870; the Primrose multitudes became the Party's ardent, loyal activists throughout the country, obedient to the wishes of CCO and of official Conservative agents in the constituencies. The League enabled the Conservative leadership to triumph at elections after 1885, following the most dramatic change to the electoral system since the middle ages.

Lord Randolph Churchill, who founded the League at the Carlton in 1883, was the first to discover the posthumous power of Disraeli's name, associating it with vague, high-sounding principles (in the best Tory tradition) which later proved equally useful to his world famous son who had the deepest affection for the League which he joined as a schoolboy. The multitudes who enlisted under the Primrose banner were divided pretty evenly between men and women: the latter first entered political life in Britain on equal terms through the League. Since they worked so hard, women were seen as the most important Primrose standard-bearers. They were strongly represented on major League occasions. The annual conference of the League at the Albert Hall in May 1900 was, *The Times* reported, 'as usual a large, brilliant and enthusiastic demonstration. The great hall was crowded with delegates of the London and provincial habitations; and in the vast assembly ladies of course predominated'.[11] The Primrose dame became a legendary figure. Her magnificent contribution converted the great Lord Salisbury, Disraeli's successor and one of the foremost Primrose heroes, into a supporter of women's suffrage.[12] Children were also brought into politics for the first time through the League. Modern popular politics in Britain were created by the Primrose League, not by organisations of the left.

All this has been largely forgotten. Roy Jenkins, in his great one-volume life of Winston Churchill, dismisses the League as 'a Conservative fringe organisation'.[13]

A.N. Wilson ignores it completely in his superbly evocative popular history of the nineteenth century, *The Victorians* (2002). It is high time that the Primrose League was given its proper place in Conservative history. That is the object of this little publication.

1 Maurice V. Brett (ed.), *Journals and Letters of Reginald Brett Viscount Esher, Vol. I 1870-1903* (Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1934), p.81. A brilliant man with a very unconventional lifestyle, Brett concealed his secrets during his lifetime: they were finally revealed in a marvellous biography written in our more liberal times (see James Lees-Milne, *The Enigmatic Edwardian: The Life of Reginald, 2nd Viscount Esher,* Sidgwick & Jackson, 1986). In these more liberal times one historian has gone so far as to suggest that Disraeli himself was gay (see William Kuhn, *The Politics of Pleasure: A Portrait of Benjamin Disraeli,* The Free Press, 2006).

2 *The Times,* 20 April 1910, p.8.

3 *The Times,* 20 April 1887, p.8.

4 John Vincent (ed.), *The Crawford Papers: The journals of David Lindsay, twenty-seventh Earl of Crawford and tenth Earl of Balcarres, 1871-1940 during the years 1892 to 1940* (Manchester University Press, 1984), p.273.

5 Peter Catterall (ed.), *The Macmillan Diaries: The Cabinet Years 1950-1957* (Pan paperback edition, 2004), p.415.

6 I have a copy of a standard diary for 1928. April 19 Thursday is marked 'Primrose Day (1881)'.

7 John Vincent, *Disraeli* (Oxford University Press paperback, 1980), p.50.

8 W.F. Monypenny and G.E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield* (revised edition, John Murray, 1929), Vol. II, p.1503.

9 Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People 1880-1935* (Basil Blackwell, 1985), p.142.

10 Janet Robb, *The Primrose League 1883-1906* (new edition, AMS Press, New York, 1968), p.103.

11 *The Times,* 10 May 1900.

12 For a discussion of the role of women, see 'The Primrose League' in G.E. Maguire, *Conservative Women: A History of Women and the Conservative Party, 1874-1997* (Macmillan, 1997), pp 27-48.

13 Roy Jenkins, *Churchill* (Macmillan, 2001), p.27.

I. HIS FAVOURITE FLOWER?

On 16 May 1885 Lord John Manners, a very old friend and colleague of Disraeli, addressed the inaugural meeting of the Ladies' Grand Council of the Primrose League at 20 Arlington Street, the London residence of Lord Salisbury, the Conservative leader in the House of Lords and soon to be Prime Minister, whose wife was a prominent figure on the new Council. Manners reminded his audience of 300 of how the League had come to be formed, and spoke of the significance of its emblem. 'The Primrose League', he said, 'took its rise from that memorable day [19 April 1883] when the statue to the late Lord Beaconsfield was first unveiled in Parliament-yard [at the Palace of Westminster] … to focus, as it were, the enthusiasm for his memory and to organise a movement on behalf of those great principles to which he had devoted his life, his genius and his marvellous energies. Then it became a question whether there should be some outward symbol and sign of this organisation … It was easy to see from the appearance of the streets what that symbol should be. Everywhere – [among] high and low, rich and poor, and on the part of both sexes – appeared that modest English flower which was known to have been loved by Lord Beaconsfield, and which was in blossom at the time of his unfortunate death'.[14] There was no question of any other symbol for the only cult ever created to honour a British politician. The confident assertion that Disraeli 'loved' the primrose has always been a subject of lively interest. Was it true? Or was it a legend for which Queen Victoria was mainly responsible?

Disraeli is the only Prime Minister to have received flowers regularly from his Sovereign. Large quantities were dispatched to him from Windsor and from

Osborne House in the Isle of Wight (a residence much loved by Queen Victoria) between 1868, the year of his first brief premiership, and his death in April 1881 at the age of seventy-six. The lavish bouquets sent in springtime included camellias, violets and of course primroses. They were acknowledged with the florid compliments that Disraeli dispensed so liberally and the Queen adored so unreservedly. 'Some bright bands of primroses have visited him today', he wrote to her in March 1878, 'which he thinks shows that Your Majesty's sceptre has touched the Enchanted Isle.'[15] He never tired of these flights of fancy, nor did she. 'He likes the primroses so much better for their being wild', he told her on another occasion. 'They seem an offering from the Fauns and Dryads of the woods of Osborne'.[16] He was not unduly downcast to learn from the Queen that they had in fact been 'picked by the Princesses and the ladies' of the court.[17] 'Of all flowers', he enthused in reply on 19 April (the future Primrose Day) 1878, 'the one that retains its beauty longest [is the] sweet primrose, the ambassador of spring'.[18] In the following year Disraeli was deluged with spring ambassadors which filled 10 Downing Street to overflowing: the head gardener at Osborne 'has orders, he says, to send them every week', their recipient remarked wearily.[19]

During his final illness in the spring of 1881 he was threatened with a large consignment, delivered directly by the royal hand. 'No, it is better not', came the famous reply. 'She would only ask me to take a message to Albert'.[20] At his funeral in April the Queen provided what was widely regarded as a definitive public pronouncement on his horticultural preference. She sent a wreath of fresh primroses which lay on his coffin bearing the inscription: 'His favourite flowers from Osborne, a tribute of affection from Queen Victoria'.[21] But some said unkindly that this was just another indication of her continuing obsession with her late husband. 'With the profound emotion of the professional widow she was moved by the memory of her husband's simple tastes'.[22] However, a letter of deep sympathy which she sent to Disraeli's devoted private secretary, Monty Corry, makes clear that her favourite minister alone was in her mind. 'The sight of the primroses He loved so well and she is so fond of make her now very sad. They will ever recall Him to her mind'.[23] (The Queen used capital letters, not just for God, but for others hardly less important to her than Him.)

Nevertheless, many people found it difficult to believe that this exotic and flamboyant politician could really have admired the modest and unpretentious primrose. Was it just another example of the flattery that he employed so effectively to attach the wayward monarch to his cause? It was she who was 'so fond' of primroses: he merely pretended to share her enthusiasm. Was Disraeli not the kind of man who would say anything to strengthen her support for him? Unsurprisingly his great rival, Gladstone, swiftly emerged as the leading primrose sceptic. He raised the issue with the cigar-smoking botanist and silkworm-breeder, Lady Dorothy Nevill, who knew Disraeli well – so well indeed that, according to one recent biographer, she may have borne his child, even though the putative mother was a close friend of Disraeli's wife.[24] 'Tell me, Lady Dorothy', Gladstone enquired, 'upon your honour, have you ever heard Lord Beaconsfield express any particular fondness for the primrose? The glorious lily, I think, was more to his taste'.[25] She did not contradict him. She wrote later that 'I never heard him express any particular admiration for the primrose, which it is always said was his favourite flower'. Nevertheless, she added loyally, 'it is quite possible that it was'. Yet another of his female admirers, Mrs Brydges Willyams, 'used every spring to send him bunches of this flower from her Devonshire garden'.[26] In this case devotion first expressed through offerings of primroses was followed by the bequest of her entire estate (worth some £2 million in today's values) when she died in 1863: in return for which she joined Disraeli and his wife in death in their vault in Hughenden churchyard. Disraeli certainly had reason to associate the primrose with financial good fortune – especially welcome to him since he had lived so much of his life up until that point on the edge of bankruptcy and in fear of arrest.

It was not hard to find people prepared to attest firmly that the primrose also had a place in his heart. Guests who dined with him after the arrival of a floral delivery from the Queen 'remembered how he would say with pride when they admired the heaped-up bowls of primroses that formed the table decoration: "They were all sent to me this morning by the Queen from Osborne, as she knows it is my favourite flower". And he told some of those who condoled with him on his loss of power in April 1880 that he was looking forward now to enjoying his favourite primroses at Hughenden … [where] he gave the woodmen strict orders

to protect the wild plants'.[27] Why then, his many critics asked, had he made only two far from generous references to his 'favourite flower' in his numerous novels? In *Coningsby* (1844) a dish of ham and eggs is said to resemble a bouquet of primroses. In *Lothair* (1870) a character exclaims, 'Primroses, I believe, make a capital salad'.

Doubts about Disraeli's love of the primrose were never stilled. It is far from certain that primroses featured prominently in the relationship with his adoring elderly (and only mildly dotty) benefactress, Mrs Brydges Willyams, who filled his vases with blooms from her fabled Devonshire garden long before Queen Victoria began to ransack the woods and flower-beds of Windsor and Osborne for him. References to heavily scented roses, however, abound in the long, affectionate correspondence he conducted with Mrs Brydges Willyams between 1851 and her death in 1863, which the leading Conservative historian, Andrew Roberts, edited for publication a few years ago. Torquay's balmy climate made possible their arrival in London and Hughenden as early as January. By the spring Disraeli could expect abundant supplies. On 1 May 1860 he wrote to her ecstatically:

> May Day has brought me roses worthy of such an anniversary! Never were they equalled for form, colour, and fragrance. Some of their brethren were still alive upon my table to welcome them, but it was evident that they were born in April.
>
> My table has never been so adorned with my favourite flowers as this year, and it is a great pleasure to me that they come, not from Cashmere, but Devonia![28]

So the doubts expressed so widely by Gladstone and other primrose sceptics would seem to have been well-founded. Judging by his own words in 1860, piles of fragrant roses would have been more appropriate tributes to his memory. It would not be surprising if other flowers became the favourites for a time to flatter other contributors to his table decorations. Would the primrose ever have been invested with such significance if Disraeli had not died in the month of April when it happens to be in abundant bloom?

The connection between statesman and flower was also criticised as wholly inappropriate. Lady Knightley, wife of a crusty Tory backbencher, was extremely displeased about it. She explained: 'I cannot stand this identification of the most simple and beautiful of flowers with one so artificial and stilted', though she believed him to be 'a great man, and few such careers are on record'.[29] (Some years later, however, when she was a prominent Primrose dame, Lady Knightley was proud to be seen 'covered in decorations in honour of Primrose day'.[30])

Just one person, wholly untroubled by doubts, seems to have been responsible for the first public display of primroses in commemoration of Disraeli which took place on the first anniversary of his death, 19 April 1882. Sir George Birdwood, a fifty-year-old senior official at the India Office recently knighted by Gladstone and a prolific writer on the affairs of the sub-continent, decided to make it his mission to ensure that Disraeli was identified indissolubly with the primrose as a means of guaranteeing that his name lived forever in the popular imagination. Simple, unaffected admiration for a man he probably never met seems to have been the only motive. 'The oriental strain in Lord Beaconsfield's character appealed strongly to him'. Birdwood had a 'whimsical imagination and love of paradox',[31] characteristics that Disraeli had possessed in abundance. Like his hero, Birdwood was drawn to mysticism and symbolism: he was later to write a controversial learned work on the origins of the swastika as a benign, not malevolent, object. Every cause that he took up was pursued with fervour. There was certainly nothing half-hearted about the one-man campaign to preserve Disraeli's memory through the primrose which he launched with a letter to *The Times* on 14 April 1882:

> It is an interesting fact worth noting that during the last day or two a demand has arisen at florists' in London, at least in every part of the West End, for what are called 'Beaconsfield buttonholes' – that is, small bunches of primroses, for wearing on the anniversary of Lord Beaconsfield's death, on the 19th inst. It will be remembered that the primrose was his favourite flower … The purpose of my letter … is … to place on open record the small beginnings of what may gradually grow into a settled popular custom, more honouring in its

> simple, unbought loyalty to Lord Beaconsfield's memory, and more truly English, than the proudest monument of bronze or marble that could be raised to his name.[32]

The letter was disingenuous. Birdwood himself had done all that he could to stimulate the demand for primroses that he represented as a spontaneous development. Disraeli's official biographers noted wryly that he had been 'largely responsible for those preparations for an outbreak of primroses on April 19 which he recounted so objectively'.[33] Some prominent Tory supporters turned him down. Great swags of primroses should, he suggested, be installed at the St Stephen's Club, established twelve years earlier (on the site now occupied by Portcullis House), which was seeking to make its mark on the Conservative social and political scene where the Carlton Club had long been dominant. The proposal aroused no enthusiasm, and the St Stephen's Club went undecorated. The Carlton itself also resisted the lure of the primrose.

When the great day came, other events created considerable distraction. Darwin died, and at Reading a man who had tried to shoot the Queen at Windsor was found not guilty on the ground of insanity. Nevertheless, despite competition from these dramatic news items, Birdwood had no reason to feel the slightest disappointment with the results of his efforts. 'Buttonholes of primroses were very noticeable in London on the day in 1882'.[34] Lady Knightley noted in her diary that 'quantities of people are walking about with primrose buttonholes to commemorate the day'[35] – greatly to her irritation. Prompted by the leading Tory newspaper *The Morning Post* (or so it later claimed), several London cab drivers adorned themselves and their horses with 'the favourite flower'. Several other newspapers including *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph,* 'were active in forwarding the scheme'. As usual in such matters hostility fuelled publicity in the most useful fashion. 'The criticism of the Opposition press furnished the necessary additional publicity to make the first Primrose Day a success'.[36]

Nowhere was it celebrated with greater fervour than at Hatfield House, the historic seat of the Cecil family and bastion of Toryism, where Disraeli had for much of his lifetime been castigated for his unprincipled political conduct by Lord

Salisbury, the future great Tory leader. In the late 1870s, however, enmity had been replaced by deep affection which was amply reaffirmed on the first Primrose Day. Lady Frances Balfour, wife of Arthur Balfour's brother, recorded that: 'We were there [at Hatfield] on the first anniversary of Beaconsfield's death, which was marked by everyone wearing primroses, and the table was decorated with them. There used to be a delightful custom of providing button holes for the guests, and they were brought before dinner to the bedrooms; on that night they were all primroses'.[37] Lady Frances, daughter of the Duke of Argyll, a leading Liberal, gamely wore one 'which did not escape the amusement of the family. "We do in Rome what Rome does", I answered'.[38]

Hatfield provided powerful endorsement of London's primrose initiatives. A tradition had been established which paved the way for the creation of the Primrose League a year later when a group of ambitious, disaffected Conservative politicians, led in swashbuckling style by Lord Randolph Churchill, took over the activity which Birdwood with his flair for publicity had begun without any apparent thought beyond the permanent commemoration of the remarkable man he admired so much. Presumably he sought no other reward. After a further letter to *The Times* exhorting even more widespread primrose wearing a year later, he disappeared from the public stage content, it seems, with an unobtrusive position among the ranks of the Primrose knights (his fine silver badge was preserved among his numerous official decorations and sold with them at auction in 1991). The name of the founder of Primrose Day found no place on the roll of honour of the Primrose League. Randolph Churchill was not a generous-minded politician, disposed to share with others the credit for the successful enterprises with which he was involved.

Naturally Churchill and his associates sedulously fostered the view that the primrose had indeed been Disraeli's favourite flower. Among members of the League it became an article of faith, never to be questioned. Successful political organisations are not founded on doubt. What Disraeli really thought will never be known with certainty. In life he always liked to keep people guessing about his feelings and beliefs. Ambiguity was the chief feature of his character. He was the Primrose sphinx. In death any number of views and convictions could be

attributed to him by those like Churchill who wanted to use his name for their own purposes. The views and convictions themselves could be interpreted differently depending on the requirements of successive generations of Tory leaders.

He could be seen, for example, as a mighty imperialist, as he was at the end of the nineteenth century. He could be presented as a pioneer of the welfare state, a view that was much favoured by Rab Butler and the post-war Tories. He could be turned (though with some difficulty) into a great exponent of high public spending, as he was by Margaret Thatcher's 'wet' opponents. Disraeli became the most conspicuous figure involved in the practice described by the great late twentieth century Tory, T.E. Utley, as 'historical body-snatching'– exhuming the careers of prominent dead politicians and forcing them to endorse some contemporary preoccupation or policy with which they have no connection.[39] Virtually all twentieth-century Conservatives believed that Disraeli had set himself the task of ending class divisions in order to create 'one nation', having famously deplored the existence of two nations in his novel *Sybil* and presided over a government that in the mid-1870s introduced some significant social reforms, though he took no great interest in them himself. The famous One Nation Group of Tory MPs, formed in 1950 by Enoch Powell and others, paid tribute to his memory with primroses. ' We laid a posy of primroses at the foot of Disraeli's statue in Parliament Square on behalf of One Nation in 1952', Mrs Enoch Powell recalled earlier this year.

Disraeli's great friend, Lady Dorothy Nevill, believed that 'it is very difficult to say what Lord Beaconsfield's real view of politics was, but my own view is that he was deeply attached to the traditions of government by aristocracy, the romantic side of which appealed to his imagination and nature. At heart I think he feared the triumph of a sort of mob rule, the coming of which it was ever his object to delay … [He had] no particular confidence in the political sagacity of an English democracy'.[40] The best recent analysis of Disraeli's political ideas concludes that 'he thought in terms of preventing decay, of defusing social tensions, of creating a unifying synthesis out of disturbance … He sought to present himself as the indispensable man in the fight for the soul of England'.[41] That made him a great national leader in his own time – and the greatest Tories are always first and foremost great national leaders.

Disraeli would have been greatly amused by the twists and turns of his posthumous reputation. He would not have minded in the least. After all they ensured his political immortality. The Primrose League, inspired by his 'favourite flower', made the greatest contribution to that immortality by elevating this extraordinarily complex, inconsistent politician into an omniscient statesman whose genius could guide the Conservative Party for ever, whatever circumstances arose. Beneath the 'favourite flower' powerful Disraeli myths were born and nurtured. No one benefited more from them than Randolph Churchill, the founder of the Primrose League, who in turn instilled them in the mind of his political heir and adoring son, Winston. The League gave them the most powerful assistance in burnishing Disraeli's reputation as an imperialist and as a passionate advocate of class unity, becoming itself a fine embodiment of 'one nation' by drawing members from right across the social spectrum. Empire and 'one nation' duly became the central elements of the Churchillian political creed, which father and son both summed up in the phrase 'Tory democracy'. It served the modern Conservative Party extremely well.

Political opponents of the League imagined Disraeli surveying it all in the sardonic manner for which he had been famous. The left-wing journal *Truth* produced a little piece of doggerel verse in which Disraeli's statue in Parliament Square, the principal Primrose monument, sighs plaintively over the 'hanging of damp, smelly wreaths round my neck' and 'the hawking of blossoms' nearby. Yet fame was irresistible.

> I own, none the less, that some pleasure is mine
> When I see all these Tories flock to my shrine.[42]

14 Press report inserted in Ladies' Executive Committee Minutes, Primrose League Papers, MS.10, f.20, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
15 Quoted in W.F. Monypenny and G.E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield* (revised edition, John Murray, 1929), Vol. II, p.1501.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p.1161.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p.1300.
20 Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1966), p.747.
21 Ibid., p.752.
22 Margot Oxford, *More Memories* (Cassell, 1933), p.33. Asquith's widow continued: 'The Prince Consort's solemn conscience and intellectual occupations were relieved by country sights, and his favourite flowers were those that are annually gathered and festooned around the many statues of Disraeli'.
23 Blake, *Disraeli*, p.752.
24 For a discussion of the inconclusive evidence, see Stanley Weintraub, *Disraeli: A Biography* (Hamish Hamilton, 1993), pp 420-30.
25 Quoted in Janet Robb, *The Primrose League 1883-1906* (new edition, AMS Press, New York, 1968), p.42.
26 Lady Dorothy Nevill, *Under Five Reigns* (Methuen, 1910), p.227.
27 Monypenny and Buckle, *Life of Disraeli*, p.1502.
28 Andrew Roberts (ed.), *The Correspondence between Mr Disraeli and Mrs Brydges Willyams* (The Roxburghe Club, 2006), p.136.
29 Julia Cartwright (ed.), *The Journals of Lady Knightley of Fawsley 1856-1884* (E.P. Dutton and Company, 1916), pp 346, 350).
30 Peter Gordon (ed.), *Politics and Society: The Journals of Lady Knightley of Fawsley 1885-1913* (Northamptonshire Record Office, 1999, p.153).
31 Article on Birdwood in the *Dictionary of National Biography 1912-1921*, pp 46-7.
32 Quoted in Monypenny and Buckle, *Life of Disraeli*, p.1502.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Cartwright (ed.), *Journals of Lady Knightley*, p.350.
36 Robb, *The Primrose League*, p.36.
37 Lady Frances Balfour, *Ne Obliviscaris*: *Dinna Forget* (Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), Vol. I, p.335.
38 Ibid.
39 See Charles Moore and Simon Heffer (eds.), *A Tory Seer: The Selected Journalism of T.E. Utley* (Hamish Hamilton, 1989), pp 86-9.
40 Ralph Nevill (ed.), *Leaves from the Note-Books of Lady Dorothy Nevill* (Macmillan, 1907), p.75.
41 J.P. Parry, 'Disraeli and England', *The Historical Journal,* Vol.43 (2000), pp 699-728.
42 *Truth*, 23 April 1891, quoted in Robb, *The Primrose League*, p.45.

II. THE CHURCHILLIAN ORIGINS

Lord Randolph Churchill was extremely fortunate that he came to be revered by his world famous son whom he constantly denigrated throughout the latter's youth and early manhood. 'Lord Randolph, immersed in his own brand of rebellious Tory politics, seldom spoke or wrote to his elder son except to chide him'.[43] In one of the greatest of all political biographies, published in 1906, Winston Churchill depicted his father as a man of clear, consistent, progressive principles who almost single-handedly saved the Conservative Party from disaster, which without him might well have proved terminal, after Disraeli's death in 1881. Despairing of 'the old men who croon over the fires in the Carlton' heedless of the need for bold new Tory initiatives, Randolph Churchill, in his son's rousing words, dedicated himself to re-establishing the Party on a new, democratic basis which 'multitudes began to follow… At a time when Liberal formulas and Tory inertia seemed alike chill and comfortless, he warmed the heart of England and strangely stirred the imagination of her people'.[44] Beginning his political career in earnest in 1880, he added fresh, popular causes – of which the expansion of empire and the welfare of the working classes were the most important – to the old Tory commitments to defend property rights and uphold the constitution. He gave the political world a new phrase, 'Tory democracy', to explain what he was about. 'It grew vital and true at his touch'.[45] To his own personal creation, the Primrose League, he entrusted the preservation and implementation of his creed after the Tory leadership rejected him brutally at the end of 1886. That gave the League an historic mission which Winston Churchill never forgot, even during his years at the forefront of the Liberal Party between 1904 and 1922.

In his son's eloquent and widely admired account, Randolph Churchill's career is presented as an epic tale of heroism. It swiftly acquired an established place in Conservative Party history. It provides a fine description of the emergence of the Primrose League. But overall the book needs to be seen as a beautifully crafted masterpiece designed to create the same kind of uncritically favourable image of Randolph that Winston was later to create for himself in his memoirs of the Second World War based on his famous axiom: 'History will be kind to me because I intend to write it'. Some said that father and son were well matched, being 'equally clever and equally unprincipled'[46] in the view of one staunch Tory after reading the great biography.

What actually happened is that after 1880 Randolph Churchill pushed himself ruthlessly to the forefront of the Conservative Party where for six quite brilliant years he dazzled the entire political world. Conservatives and Liberals alike were transfixed. 'What would Randy do next?' was the question everyone asked as one intense crisis succeeded another during this extraordinary, tempestuous period that reached a climax in the first Irish Home Rule crisis of 1885-86 which gave the Tories a commanding twenty-year ascendancy in British politics.

The reality is that in Churchill's career there were no consistent principles, no single-handed heroic campaigns to save the Party he loved, no great axioms of Tory democracy for the Primrose League to maintain and advance after 1886 with Winston's help. The real story, painstakingly uncovered by Roy Foster, now Professor of Irish History at Oxford University, in his detailed political life of Churchill published in 1981[47], is one of brilliant improvisation, utter inconsistency and unbridled ambition brought to a sudden end by Churchill's dramatic resignation in December 1886 when he was at the height of his power as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons. It was the qualities that Churchill *père* actually possessed, not the high-minded ideals and purposes that filial piety ascribed to him, which made him such a remarkable figure – with a power to call his own political organisation, the Primrose League, into existence – in the fiercely contested political battles of the first half of the 1880s.

Churchill was pitted against an array of formidable politicians: for the Liberals, who were then in power, Gladstone, Lord Hartington (the only man in British

history to have turned down the premiership three times), and the great radical tribune Joseph Chamberlain, then regarded as the British Robespierre; on the Conservative side, Sir Stafford Northcote and the great Lord Salisbury, the ultimate victor in this strife-ridden period, who was to destroy Churchill's career in 1886 and rule the Conservative Party unchallenged for a generation. (Asked why he kept Churchill in the wilderness thereafter Salisbury is said to have replied: 'Did you ever know a man who, having had a boil on his neck, wanted another?') One sign of Salisbury's domination was his acquisition of heroic status within the Primrose League after 1886. Created initially as Churchill's personal fiefdom, it passed completely under Salisbury's control.

No one could possibly have predicted that dramatic turn of fortune in 1883, the year of the League's foundation. Churchill had established himself as Salisbury's valiant, unwavering champion. His objective was to ensure that when the Tories ousted Gladstone's second ministry and returned to government, the premiership went to Salisbury, at that point the Party's new, widely distrusted leader in the House of Lords and not to the more experienced, but uninspiring, leader in the Commons, Sir Stafford Northcote. Salisbury would need a new leader in the Commons: Churchill looked forward to filling the part. In the best remembered scenes of political life in the early 1880s Churchill harried Northcote mercilessly in a campaign of denigration from which many Tory MPs, while professing to be profoundly shocked, derived much guilty pleasure. 'Third-rate', 'apathetic', 'cretin': Churchill's abuse recalled Disraeli's ferocious attacks on Sir Robert Peel nearly forty years earlier.* Indeed in everything he did during this extraordinarily dramatic period in politics Churchill encouraged people to see him as a second

* In this period politicians like Churchill and his Tory colleagues said the harshest things about each other, but continued to meet socially on terms of perfect amity. For some time in the early 1880s, when the insults were flying, Churchill was Northcote's neighbour in St. James's Place, London, close to the Carlton's current home (then Arthur's Club). At the end of January 1883 during a winter cruise in the Mediterranean, Northcote and his wife bumped into Randolph and Jennie Churchill by chance 'in the beautiful public gardens' of Monte Carlo. Noting the encounter in his diary, Northcote added hastily that he 'did not go into the gaming house' (where the Churchills would have been well-known). The following day, a Sunday, Northcote returned to his yacht after morning service, at which the Bishop of Derry preached, and 'found that the Randolph Churchills had been there and given Lady N. a beautiful bouquet' (Northcote's diary, 27-28 January 1883). Enmity was reserved strictly for politics. (The surviving volumes of the diary kept by Northcote fitfully between the 1860s and the 1880s are in private hands. Typescript copies of substantial portions of the diary are in the Northcote Papers in the British Library including those recording a visit by Northcote to Ulster in October 1883 which I edited and published in 1975 under the title 'A Conservative Party Leader in Ulster'.)

Disraeli: adopting the primrose as the symbol for his personal political organisation was just another indication of his enthusiasm for connecting himself with the dead Tory hero who, he said, had sketched out the rudiments of Tory democracy which Churchill now claimed to be turning into a mighty political movement. (Less reverentially, the political cartoonists of the period depicted the small, elfin figure of Churchill struggling not very successfully to bear the weight of Disraeli's substantial coat on his own slender shoulders.)

Churchill did not stand fearlessly alone as the pitiless persecutor of Northcote. He had two devoted Parliamentary comrades in arms: Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, a clever world-weary diplomatist who enjoyed making trouble, and John Gorst, an able but embittered lawyer who wanted revenge for what he saw as the rank ingratitude with which he had been treated after devising a whole new organisational structure for the Party to enable it to garner the votes of working men enfranchised by Disraeli's Reform Act of 1867 (unfortunately for Gorst the new structure was not regarded as a success). Churchill's dangerous political coach had one other, much less reliable wheel: Arthur Balfour, Salisbury's nephew and eventual successor (in 1902) as Party leader. Throughout his life Balfour made a habit of not committing himself fully to anyone or to any cause, but for a time he associated himself in a guarded way with Churchill's schemes which were designed to serve his uncle's political interests. These four Tory musketeers were immortalised as early as December 1880 as the Fourth Party in one of the best-known of *Vanity Fair's* famous cartoons. By 1883 Balfour had tiptoed away from the little band which happily regarded itself as the next most significant force in Parliament after the newly organised Irish Nationalists under Parnell ('the third party'), but Drummond Wolff and, to a lesser extent, Gorst, were Churchill's close collaborators in devising the Primrose League which thus began life as the Fourth Party's ardent support group outside Parliament as the campaign to destroy Northcote and raise up Salisbury intensified.

To Churchill and his allies, like so many other Tory rebels before and since, Party unity counted for nothing. They were quite content for the Party to be thought of as being 'in a condition of hopeless confusion' split 'into two rival sections'[48], flattering themselves in the process since the overwhelming majority of Tory MPs in the early 1880s supported Northcote, not them.

The battle reached a decisive stage as the second anniversary of Disraeli's death approached. An important task had to be discharged on the 19 April 1883: the unveiling in Westminster Palace Yard of a large statue of the dead leader, intended to impress posterity, which had been designed by an Italian sculptor, Mario Raggi.* 'The occasion was looked forward to in political circles as one of more than ordinary interest'.[49] Would the ceremony be performed by Northcote or by his rival for the premiership, Salisbury? At the beginning of the month Churchill was outraged to discover that the honour would fall to Northcote, 'whilst to Lord Salisbury was relegated the purely secondary role of proposing a vote of thanks to his colleague. The effect of this arrangement was obvious. It amounted to a general recognition of Sir Stafford Northcote on the part of the Conservative party as its [overall] leader'.[50] That would create a general assumption that Northcote rather than Salisbury would be the next Conservative Prime Minister.

Churchill fired off a couple of characteristically rude letters to *The Times*. Never a man to confine himself to just one or two insults, he accused Northcote of 'neglected opportunities, pusillanimity, combativeness at wrong moments, vacillation, dread of responsibility, repression and discouragement of hard-working followers, collusions with the Government, hankerings after coalitions, jealousies, commonplaces [and] want of perception'. Mild indeed are the public criticisms of disaffected Conservative MPs today compared with Churchill's contemptuous onslaught. It was a much harsher political age, as Winston Churchill often pointed

* After its unveiling the statue was erected in Parliament Square. It stood in a prominent position facing St Margaret's Church, Westminster, but was later moved and now looks towards the Houses of Parliament from the northern side of the Square. Raggi showed his complete political impartiality by subsequently designing a statue of Gladstone for the Liberals of Manchester, but they did not treat it with the reverence accorded for so long to the great Disraeli memorial by members of the Primrose League. Its state today would have caused them much distress. Gone are the small iron arches that created an enclosure round it which was adorned with flowers and a tall, smart lamp to illuminate it. The original hallowed plot near St Margaret's has been much reduced in size by the wide modern road that has turned the Square into a large traffic island where tiresome protestors disport themselves; what remains of the original site is now occupied by a statue of Nelson Mandela (not that Disraeli would have objected greatly to the liberator of South Africa since he did not regard that country as a prized British possession). He stands today rather forlornly in a row equidistant between statues of his two Tory predecessors, Peel (whom he overthrew) and the 14th Earl of Derby (with whom he worked uneasily for 22 years). Derby's statue retains its fine iron panels round its pedestal depicting scenes of his life; all adornments have been removed from Disraeli. When I visited him on Primrose Day this year not a single 'favourite flower' was to be seen. Not one reverential glance was directed towards him. A small group of scruffy children milled noisily and uncaringly around the statue to which vast crowds had once brought their huge floral tributes annually on 19 April. The Primrose League would have been appalled.

out. Northcote's abject failures were contrasted with the golden success of his rival. The flawless Salisbury had 'projected a policy rightly conceiving and eloquently expressing the true principles of popular Toryism. Against him are directed all the malignant efforts of envious mediocrity'.[51]

Greatly enjoying the shock caused by this letter, Churchill decided to go further in his second missive published ten days before the unveiling ceremony. This time he made no mention of Salisbury, but declared that the Party must look for deliverance to the bearer of 'an ancient name'. 'It was understood at once that the reference was mainly directed, not to Lord Salisbury, but to himself, who was equally the bearer of "an ancient name"… At the Carlton Club and elsewhere this audacious manifesto was the absorbing topic of conversation'.[52] Tory policy, said Churchill, must 'bring to perfection those schemes of Imperial rule and of social reform which Lord Beaconsfield had only time to dream of'.[53] He seemed now to be presenting himself as the man who would realise Disraeli's dream. Did the unpredictable Randy seriously covet the leadership himself at the age of thirty-four after just three years as the Tory Party's most ardent rebel? That thought must have been prominent in the minds of many of those who, when Primrose Day 1883 finally came, watched Northcote unveil the statue in the rain. Elsewhere on that day the courts were dealing with a very grave threat to the hopes and ambitions of all Disraeli's heirs and successors. Dr Gallacher, an Irish Fenian on trial for treason, gave details of a plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament with nitro-glycerine. Even so, however, the Conservative Party's great event was not seriously overshadowed.

'The Primrose League sprang from the unveiling of Lord Beaconsfield's statue'.[54] Sir George Birdwood and his newspaper friends, who had promoted Primrose Day zealously a year earlier, redoubled their efforts for the second anniversary of Disraeli's death. 19 April 1883 was marked by the widespread wearing of primroses. 'It was reported that businessmen had worn them in their buttonholes, that bouquets had appeared for sale in flower baskets, and that cabbies had stuck primroses in their caps and behind the ears of their horses'.[55] At the unveiling of the statue primroses adorned every breast. The leading Tory newspaper, *The Morning Post*, proclaimed grandiloquently that 'the April primrose

shall be a perpetual reminder of the statesman of Hughenden and of a fame which will not perish from the page of history until the primrose, in such demand today, shall itself become extinct'.[56] Amongst the Liberals there was unsurprisingly much scoffing. In Downing Street, Gladstone's private secretary, Edward Hamilton, noted in his diary on 23 April 1883: 'Last week on the 19th the Beaconsfield statue was unveiled, and on that day a sentimental hobby has been started of wearing primroses – henceforth to be called Primrose Day [Hamilton had clearly failed to notice its inauguration the previous year] – in honour of Lord B. whose favourite flower was supposed to be primroses. Marvellously inappropriate and un-English!'[57] (It is interesting to note that while Hamilton thought the whole business alien to English tradition, Birdwood, the founder of Primrose Day, thought it 'truly English'.)

Tory MPs, never reluctant to back a new fashion of any kind, joined in. Churchill's faithful political retainer, Henry Drummond Wolff, went down to the House of Commons later in the day after the statue had been unveiled.

> The well-known superintendent of the members' cloak-room, Mr Cove, said to him, 'You must have a primrose', and gave him one. Thus adorned, Sir Henry entered the Chamber and found the whole Conservative party similarly decorated with Lord Beaconsfield's favourite flower. The fact impressed him vividly and he said to Lord Randolph as they walked home together, 'What a show of Primroses! This should be turned to account. Why not start a "Primrose League"?' Lord Randolph was instantly interested. 'Draw up a plan', he said, 'to carry out your idea and we will see what can be done'.[58]

Wolff set to work. He found inspiration in the Orange Order (which then operated in Britain as well as Ireland) and in the plethora of private social welfare and benefit organisations – such as the Foresters and Oddfellows – which the Conservative Party backed vigorously, as they boasted in their election literature, for providing insurance schemes for the less well-off against life's hardships and inevitable necessities like funerals.

> [Wolff] saw how popular the badges, grades and honorary distinctions of these bodies were with the working classes who supported them. He resolved that the Primrose League should be inferior to none of these in the variety of its regalia or the magniloquence of its titles.[59]

It was Wolff, therefore, that the several million loyal Tories who were to become involved in the Primrose League over the years to come had to thank for the extraordinary array of decorations, sashes and badges in which they delighted and for the titles – the knighthoods and damehoods – awarded to members in abundance on payment of the requisite fees to help meet the costs of the League's political work.

Plans were discussed by Churchill and his cronies during the summer of 1883 over lunches – which became famous in the annals of the League – hosted by Lady Dorothy Nevill who crops up everywhere in the story of the League's early days, supplying it with an intimate personal link with Disraeli, whose bed she may have shared. In October and November 1883 discussions proceeded more formally involving a group of four: Churchill and Wolff were joined by the energetic, embittered expert on Party organisation, John Gorst, and the wealthy Sir Alfred Slade, a slavish follower of Churchill who was Receiver-General of the Inland Revenue (political neutrality not being then required from high-ranking officials).

The four 'met frequently in the card room of the Carlton Club to perfect their plan'[60] for the formation of 'a new political society which should embrace all classes and all creeds except atheists and enemies of the British nation'.[61] So it was among the card players of the Carlton that 'the constitution of the League, its objects and its machinery were settled even in detail … Specimen badges were made. The declaration to be signed by every member of the League was drawn up'.[62] Its original wording (which was subsequently amended slightly) ran as follows:

> I declare on my honour and faith that I will devote my best ability to the maintenance of Religion, of the Estates of the

> Realm, and of the Imperial Ascendancy of Great Britain; that I will keep secret all matters that may come to my knowledge as a Member of the Primrose Tory League; and that consistently with my allegiance to the Sovereign of these Realms, I will obey all orders coming from the constituted authority of the League for the advancement of these objects.[63]

Churchill, Wolff, Gorst and Slade swore this declaration and then constituted themselves as the League's Ruling Council with power to add to their number 'in a corner of the card room of the Carlton Club on November 17, 1883'.[64]

These events at the Carlton Club evoked no immediate, widespread applause. 'I doubt the Primrose League coming to anything', Lord Salisbury said dismissively.[65] He could not have been more wrong – fortunately for him. He was to be the principal beneficiary of the League's extraordinary success in its heyday after 1885.

Several million men, women and children would over the next century swear the Primrose oath, relish the titles it conferred and wear its baubles and bangles with intense pride. This is not the way in which successful, mainstream political organisations traditionally conduct themselves. A taste for dressing up and displaying ardent public enthusiasm is found usually on the more extreme fringes of politics. It is not surprising that some should have regarded the League as rather un-English. What made the criticism unfair was that the League's curious customs were observed with a thoroughly English light-heartedness and sense of enjoyment. That is what Churchill himself brought to politics. Naturally he instilled it in the organisation he created. There was no ideological intensity in the Primrose League.

43 John Colville, *The Churchillians* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p.18.
44 W.S. Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill* (Macmillan, 1906), Vol. II, p.487.
45 Ibid.
46 Peter Gordon (ed.), *Politics and Society: The Journals of Lady Knightley of Fawsley 1885-1913* (Northamptonshire Record Office, 1999), p.405.
47 R.F. Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill: A Political Life* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981).
48 Harold E. Gorst, *The Fourth Party* (Smith, Elder & Co., 1906), p.209.
49 Ibid., p.226.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., pp 230-1.
52 Ibid., pp 236-7.
53 W.S. Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, Vol. I, p.250.
54 Ibid., p.256.
55 Robb, *The Primrose League*, p.35.
56 Ibid.
57 W.R. Bahlman (ed.), *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton 1880-1885* (Oxford University Press, 1972), Vol. 2, p.425.
58 W.S. Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, Vol. I, pp 256-7. (There is no authoritative, written contemporary record. The conversation is given slightly differently in Harold Gorst's *The Fourth Party*, pp 238-9.)
59 W.S. Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill,* Vol. I, p.257.
60 Robb, *The Primrose League*, p.37.
61 W.S. Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, Vol. I, p.257.
62 Ibid., p.258.
63 Robb, *The Primrose League*, p.38.
64 Ibid.
65 Quoted in E.J. Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968), p.189.

III. CHURCHILLIAN PRE-EMINENCE

The Primrose League was created to help advance Randolph Churchill's political interests. It had at its start no other purpose. Its work would be done inside the Conservative Party, and yet the Party leaders had not given it their approval. It was in the very early stages unauthorised by them and unaccountable either to them or to Conservative Central Office, which had been founded in 1870. Nothing like it had ever been seen before. Perhaps, some said wistfully, it was just 'another of Randy's pranks'[66] and he would soon tire of it: steady, long-term commitment to specific objectives did not after all come readily to him.

Within weeks, however, it was clear that the League was no short-lived Churchillian escapade. It became a family affair as 'Lord Randolph's numerous relations were enlisted'.[67] The womenfolk, led by his strong-minded mother, the widowed Duchess of Marlborough, were particularly conspicuous, providing the first intimation of the way in which the League was to transform the position of women by bringing them into mainstream Tory political activities. Meanwhile the genial little group who had constituted themselves as the League's Ruling Council (later renamed Grand Council) continued to conspire amiably in the Carlton's card room and invited several more of Churchill's followers to join them, including Colonel Fred Burnaby, Britain's most famous imperial knight-errant after General Gordon and the Conservative Party's most audacious campaigner after Churchill himself (the two of them had just joined forces as Tory candidates for Birmingham in a determined assault on Joe Chamberlain's fiefdom where Burnaby had stood at the 1880 election).

The League's statutes and ordinances were approved and printed at the start of December 1883. 'A humble office was taken on a second floor in Essex Street, [off the] Strand, and the first public announcement was made on December 18, 1883, in the advertisement columns of the *Times* and the *Morning Post* as follows:

> … Gentlemen wishing to be enrolled in the Primrose Tory League must apply in writing to the Registrar, Primrose Tory League, care of Messrs. Lacy, Harland & Co., Bankers, London, E.C., or Messrs. Hopkinson & Sons, Bankers, 3 Regent Street, London, by whom all information will be supplied.' [68]

No flood of applications was anticipated or even desired. At this stage no mass movement was planned. Widespread publicity was not sought. Just 720 primrose rosettes were ordered, along with a hundred enamel primroses and a small quantity of official badges. The first women members began to adorn themselves with Primrose League finery. In January 1884 the ubiquitous Lady Dorothy Nevill, the possible Disraeli mistress, and her (legitimate) daughter, appeared in London society 'magnificently decorated with silver badges and Primrose riband, they being Dames of the Order'.[69] Two months later, Gladstone's private secretary and harsh critic of the League, Edward Hamilton, encountered Lady Dorothy 'decked out with the foolish order of the "Primrose league!" '[70] To try and curb these pretensions, Gladstone's wife paraded herself one day in March 1884 with 'a splendid bouquet of primroses, presented to her by Lady Hayter'.[71] The ploy was a total failure. Whether or not it had been Disraeli's favourite flower, the primrose was now firmly associated with the League.

So, as recruitment proceeded in a gentle and restrained way, the early members were supplied with the first Primrose insignia and began to display their allegiance proudly. The curious new arrival on the Tory political scene had acquired an air of permanence as a committed, but quite small-scale body – it had fewer than a thousand members in March 1884 – providing devoted support to Randolph Churchill in his continuing quest for political glory. Northcote was right in assuming that Churchill would use the League to cause 'immense mischief'[72] if at any point that should suit his selfish purposes.

Churchill's political importance was increased by other unprecedented activities. He became the first front-rank Tory to sway large audiences in the great provincial towns and cities. He had that rarest of combinations, equal mastery of Parliament and the public platform. For far too long Gladstone – 'the People's William' – had reigned supreme as a mass orator, drawing thousands to his meetings and even to railway stations along the route to his Midlothian constituency. Only the biting radical rhetoric of Joe Chamberlain approached Gladstone's lofty moralising tones in popularity. Disraeli never took up the challenge: apart from two celebrated public speeches in 1872 sketching out a vague Tory programme in much-quoted terms, he confined almost entirely himself to Parliament, telling everyone how much he deplored the corrupting effects of Gladstone's demagoguery on public life. It is unlikely that he would have approved of his self-styled protégé's emergence as the Tory's popular tribune after 1880. But Churchill loved every minute of every performance on the innumerable public platforms from which he spoke. The success of Churchill, the mass orator, fuelled and intensified the speculation about his chances of achieving what he had indicated at the time of the unveiling of the Disraeli statue in April 1883: that he aimed to displace both Northcote and Salisbury, and become Tory leader himself. 'His future leadership of the Tories was one of the axioms of political calculation'.[73] Arthur Balfour, who worked with him less than wholeheartedly in the Fourth Party, wrote later:

> He resolved to reach, either in one step or two, the summit of the political ladder … Throughout the country the rank and file of the Conservative Party, mindful of [Gladstone's victory over them in 1880] thirsted for retaliation. But who was there competent to retaliate? Randolph was their man. Audacious even to recklessness, born with a somewhat insolent wit which, softened to social uses, delighted his personal friends, but, untrammelled on the platform, made him the most formidable of opponents, he gave his partisans exactly what they wanted, and gave it in abundance. Dizzy was dead; is it strange or blameworthy that he regarded himself as Dizzy's predestined heir? [74]

Churchill may not have been the first to realise that most Tories would rather laugh than think: but he was the first to make politics real fun for them. When the serious-minded wife of an Oxford don suggested to Churchill that Conservative supporters needed some solid political education, he replied 'No, the only way is to amuse them: they're quite incapable of anything else'.[75] By the 1880s the music halls had become the great institutions of popular culture. They 'rang with references to "Randy-Pandy" … the best known figure in England'.[76] Appropriately, Churchill supplemented their entertainment, providing political music hall for the vast crowds which came to hear him. He exhibited his talents particularly effectively in one of the most famous of his speeches, delivered in Blackpool, a town shaped by the music hall, on 24 January 1884. One of its themes was Gladstone's favourite hobby:

> For the purposes of recreation he [Gladstone] has selected the felling of trees, and we may usefully remark that his amusements, like his politics, are essentially destructive. Every afternoon the whole world is invited to assist at the crashing fall of some beech or elm or oak. The forest laments in order that Mr Gladstone may perspire, and full accounts of these proceedings are forwarded by special correspondents to every daily paper every recurring morning … [A deputation of] working-men were guided through the ornamental grounds, into the wide-spreading park [at Hawarden, Gladstone's Flintshire seat], strewn with the wreckage and ruins of the Prime Minister's sport. All around them, we may suppose, lay the rotting trunks of once umbrageous trees: all around them, tossed by the winds, were boughs and bark and withered shoots. They come suddenly on the Prime Minister and Master Herbert [Gladstone, then MP for Leeds], in scanty attire and profuse perspiration, engaged in the destruction of a gigantic oak, just giving its last dying groan. They are permitted to gaze and to worship and adore, and, having conducted themselves with exemplary propriety, are each of them presented with

> a few chips as a memorial of that memorable scene. Is not this … a perfect type and emblem of Mr Gladstone's government of the Empire? … nothing but chips – hard, dry, unnourishing, indigestible chips. To all those who leaned upon Mr Gladstone, who trusted in him, and who hoped for something from him, chips, nothing but chips.[77]

Tories in the constituencies had never heard anything like this before. Gladstone 'remarked that it was a curious fact that real vulgar abuse always and only emanated from scions of the highest aristocracy'.[78] After the highly personal attacks and the gales of laughter they provoked came a simple, telling Party political message: those unnourishing Gladstonian chips. Adapted to local circumstances and delivered through a variety of amusements, this was the formula that was to bring the Primrose League such success as the Conservative Party's first mass organisation. It inherited his mission, if not always his talent, to amuse.

Churchill became 'unquestionably the most popular speaker in the Conservative party'.[79] Salisbury, no mean orator himself, readily conceded Churchill's pre-eminence as 'the most brilliant and popular platform speaker of the day'.[80] According to his great friend, Lord Rosebery, a future Liberal Prime Minister, he attracted larger audiences than Gladstone[81] who had never before yielded second place to anyone. The overthrow of the Gladstonian ascendancy in popular oratory was immensely satisfying. Churchill himself said in October 1884 that 'it has been my good fortune to meet in the course of the last few months very large assemblies of the electors of the country. I saw at Manchester in August an assembly which was admitted by all to number close upon 100,000 people,* and all of them were adherents of the Tory party'.[82] (How the Conservative Party

* Manchester at that time could accommodate such a mighty throng – larger than the biggest crowd ever attracted by Gladstone – in its 50-acre Belle Vue pleasure gardens whose delights included bear pits, polar bear cages, restaurants for 4,000 people and a ballroom for 10,000. Over eighty years later Winston Churchill spoke there, though he drew a comparatively modest 8,000 listeners (see my *Tory Heroine: Dorothy Brant and the Rise of Conservative Women*, Sumfield & Day, 2008, p.56). Multitudes of Tories also gathered in the Pomona Gardens, Old Trafford before they were closed in the late 1880s to make way for the Manchester Ship Canal. Randolph Churchill was among the Pomona orators, but an appearance by Disraeli to address some 100,000 in 1869, as a local historian has claimed, seems most unlikely in view of his disinclination to speak outside Parliament: none of his biographers mentions it.

today would rejoice if it could draw a small fraction of that number to a meeting in Manchester.)

The thousands who flocked to listen to Churchill would have enlisted joyfully in his Primrose League, but he gave them no great encouragement. Instead of enlarging the League to create a really substantial political army of his own, he preferred to try and assume command of the Party's existing forces. In October 1883, at the very point when the League was being formed, he launched the most audacious of all his political campaigns: to seize control of the body which represented the constituency parties throughout the country, the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations, founded in 1867, and turn its members into his loyal followers with power to run the Party's affairs and approve the parliamentary candidates who stood in its name. For the first – and, so far, only – time a leading Tory vowed to turn the Party into a democratic body run by its members. He fought the campaign with all his well-known rudeness, hurling insults at Lord Salisbury as well as at Stafford Northcote. He 'was prepared to go to ruthless extremities in order to attain his ends'.[83]

It was his great bid for the Conservative leadership – and he lost. In July 1884 he settled terms with Salisbury for the future functioning of the National Union. Only very modest changes were made: the cause of internal Party democracy was summarily abandoned by its champion. Churchill made clear to the political world that, for a time at least, he was reconciled to being 'the second Conservative in the country, after Lord Salisbury'.[84] While the fratricidal strife was at its height, Northcote, the clear loser in this battle (it was inconceivable thereafter that he would ever be Prime Minister), feared that 'if Churchill's National Union proposals were ignored' he would continue his leadership bid with the aid of the League which would be given 'the power of saying that the rich men of the party are stifling the energies of the workers'.[85] But Churchill decided that peace would be better than a further stand with the League, his praetorian guard, alongside him: his great popularity and ruthlessness had simply not brought him sufficient power to overthrow both Northcote and Salisbury. Under the peace terms of July 1884 the League was recognised as an official Party organisation, helping to buttress Churchill's new position as the second figure in the Party hierarchy. Until his whole career foundered at the end of 1886, the League, in which he remained

pre-eminent, developed its services to him and began to extend them to the Party at large in the most useful fashion, with a notable contribution coming from the ladies in his family.

The League's founder had not seen politics as women's work. Churchill intended his fiefdom to be a male preserve. He was overruled by the two women closest to him in life: his formidable mother, the Duchess of Marlborough, and his beautiful American wife, the former Miss Jennie Jerome. The recently widowed Duchess, a politician to her fingertips, yearned for proper public involvement in this man's world. His wife wanted an occupation to help fill the time that she did not spend with her string of lovers (among whom the Prince of Wales, long thought of as her most important conquest, is only tentatively included by her most recent biographer [86]).

Churchill was quickly made to see the error of his ways. The League's foremost proselytiser, Drummond Wolff, went down to Blenheim to administer the Primrose oath to the two women and 'all the [other] female members of the family who happened to be there … [They] were enrolled as dames and were given a badge and a numbered diploma … I must say we laughed immoderately over the grandiloquent names', Jennie Churchill recorded in her memoirs.[87] But she set to work with a will, canvassing furiously for her husband's victory in the Woodstock by-election of July 1885 which, under the prevailing electoral law, inevitably followed his inclusion in Salisbury's first government. A jolly little ditty was recited in her honour by the awed voters of Woodstock:

> Bless my soul! that Yankee lady,
> Whether day was bright or shady,
> Dashed about the district like an oriflamme of war,
> When the voters saw her bonnet,
> With the bright pink roses on it,
> They followed as the soldiers did the Helmet of Navarre.[88]

The only sadness here is that the bonnet was trimmed with roses and not primroses (though the latter would not have been easy to find in the month of July).

'All my energy was expended in helping to start the League', she wrote to Salisbury's daughter many years later, 'and in fighting for it in the early years of its existence before', she added tartly, 'your family did us the honour of joining it'.[89] Her father, the fabulously profligate entrepreneur Leonard Jerome, looked on approvingly from Monte Carlo: 'I have great faith in the Primrose League', he wrote. 'Depend upon it that it is an institution of tremendous power. I shouldn't wonder at all if it decided in the near future the fate of the party'. He rejoiced to 'think you & Randolph are the Christopher Columbuses of the machine'.[90]

The Duchess was given the most important post created for women in the League: President of the Ladies' Grand Council, established formally in March 1885. Unenlightened men wanted to confine her and her colleagues to gentle, largely philanthropic activities. The Duchess insisted on having a serious political role within the League whose overall aim, she declared, should be 'to show the nation that the Conservatives are interested in the wellbeing and comfort of the people'.[91] It was in that spirit that she joined her daughter-in-law and a posse of Primrose dames in yet another of Randolph Churchill's bold, impetuous ventures: his campaign to wrest one of the Birmingham constituencies from the control of the city's great Liberal power-broker, Joe Chamberlain, in the general election of November 1885, though without his comrade in arms, the colourful Colonel Fred Burnaby (six foot four high, capable of lifting two small ponies simultaneously, and renowned as a balloonist, self-promoting journalist, explorer and intrepid fighter in distant lands) who had been killed by a dervish spear* as the Gordon Relief Expedition neared Khartoum in January 1885. 'Lord Randolph was helped from morn till night by his wife and his mother, at the head of their Primrose Dames. These ladies canvassed the whole of the Central Division street by street and house by house; and the Duchess of Marlborough … visited the factories and addressed the workmen effectively on her son's behalf'.[92] The unsuccessful candidate's wife wrote later that 'to have brought down the great Mr [John] Bright's majority to

* On 17 January 1885 Burnaby, a man of 'massive simplicity and imperturbable courage', was at the forefront of a huge force of soldiers when it was 'attacked by 15,000 of the faithful, each of them with a prayer tied to his arm furnished by the Mahdi, promising to turn infidel bullets into water … It was said that men who were themselves fighting for their lives wept as he went down' (Brian Thomson, *Imperial Vanities,* HarperCollins paperback, 2003, pp.251-3). A legendary figure in the story of the British Empire and a great stalwart of the League, he dominated the Primrose valhalla.

400 was a virtual triumph. The Radical Caucus and Mr Chamberlain's stronghold were shaken to their foundation'.[93] Her commitment to her husband's political advancement had in no way been diminished by the collapse of their marriage and their decision in the mid-1880s to lead largely separate lives.

Indeed, she continued to show her devotion to the League long after Churchill himself had faded from it. 'For many years', his wife recorded, 'I worked strenuously on behalf of the League. I became the "Dame President" of many Habitations, and used to go all over the country inaugurating them'.[94] An accomplished pianist, she was also in great demand as a star performer at Primrose entertainments. There was much rejoicing at Wimborne in Dorset where she gave a major fund-raising concert in 1887. The Duchess remained equally faithful in her support for the League until her death in 1899. She enlivened proceedings in the Ladies' Grand Council by picking quarrels with Lady Salisbury, whose husband she could never forgive for accepting Randolph Churchill's impulsive resignation in December 1886. Her son was thought to have encouraged the antics,[95] so characteristic of the male political world. (By 1890 things were so bad at the Ladies' Grand Council that 'the Duchess now won't come if Lady Salisbury is there, so childish'.[96]) Looking back on her pioneering role as a whole (and disregarding the childishness), one of her colleagues reflected that 'she certainly set us a good example in the days when political work was not, as it is now, the fashion among ladies'.[97] Following that fine example, 'dames of the League became famous as intrepid commanders of canvassing shock troops, especially in hostile territory such as the East End of London or South Wales'.[98] The Duchess's devoted work for the League deserved a large place in the first biography of her which was published this year: it actually received no more than a passing mention.[99]

Without Randolph Churchill there would have been no League: without the two powerful women in his family its character would have been utterly different. The League was therefore almost as much their gift to the Conservative Party as his. Through their determined efforts the Ladies' Grand Council established itself as a pivotal element of the League's work. 'Of the many thousands of canvassers furnished by the Primrose League, more than one half were obtained by means of the organisations at the disposal of the Ladies' Grand Council'. At the very

first election in which it was involved, 1885, 'not less than 10,000 non-resident voters, the canvassing of whom forms so important a feature in the operations of the League, were induced to vote by ladies'. In the countryside the Ladies' Grand Council was put to work on the political enlightenment 'of the rural electorate, which comprehends the exposure of Radical delusions and libels, [and] constitutes one of the chief functions of the Primrose League'.[100] Jennie Churchill contended that women made the best canvassers because of 'the persuasive gentleness characteristic of their sex'[101] – though gentleness was not exactly her own principal characteristic.

Churchill never paid public tribute to their work or to its impact on the nature of the League. His interest in his creation began to diminish in 1885, and disappeared almost completely when, to his great surprise, Salisbury accepted his resignation from the Cabinet at the end of December 1886* and he forfeited the second place in the Party hierarchy. He established the League as a contingent of personal supporters to help him in his quest for power. There is no reason to suppose that he ever expected (or wanted) it to develop into the mass organisation it rapidly became. Yet by Primrose Day 1885 he was conscious that something rather remarkable had occurred since the little meeting in the Carlton eighteen months earlier. Having recruited some 11,000 members, the League had now become a power throughout the land. That was the theme of what was probably his last great speech to the League delivered on 18 April 1885:

> From the day – less than two years ago – when some half-dozen or more gentlemen met together in the Carlton and founded the League, to the present day, when its members may be numbered by thousands, in spite of every kind of ridicule and criticism, it has grown and grown and grown. It has flowed all over the country, into town and hamlet alike, winning its way among all classes, and gathering into the net

* According to the well-connected Lady Dorothy Nevill, it was in the smoking-room at the Carlton that Churchill made his celebrated comment after his resignation which he had expected to emphasise his indispensability: 'All great men make mistakes. Napoleon forgot Blücher. I forgot Goschen' (Ralph Nevill (ed.), *Leaves from the Note-Books of Lady Dorothy Nevill*, Macmillan, 1907, p.21).

> of the Constitution hundreds of able and zealous workers whom ordinary political organisations might never have touched. In every constituency in this country where there is a habitation of the Primrose League the Conservative candidate will have at his command a band of workers, a *corps d'élite,* volunteers and not mercenaries, representing and drawn from all classes of the community, united on terms of the most perfect equality, and pledged by honour and by the principles of their political faith to sacrifice their time and devote all their energy, experience and influence to placing him at the head of the poll.[102]

The great emblems of the League, now seen everywhere at Conservative Party meetings following the Churchill/Salisbury accord of July 1884, provided vivid evidence of its importance. When at the end of June 1886 Churchill spoke at a riding school in his Paddington constituency, a press reporter covering the event was struck by 'the Primrose orders which dangled at the bosoms of men and women alike, knights and ladies, squires and dames, of different degrees of picturesqueness'.[103]

Now firmly and officially attached to the Party, the League could not continue to love its founder heartily when he returned to his old role of Tory rebel after the end of 1886. 'He pointedly ignored the organization, while the *Primrose Record* [the League's official journal] attacked his politics virulently'.[104] Though he remained one of its trustees, his strained relations with the ever more important body that he had created were prominent among the many misfortunes that he had to bear during his final years of steadily increasing physical decline. In Lord Rosebery's memorable words, 'he was the chief mourner at his own protracted funeral'.[105] He may well have known since the early 1880s 'the nature and severity of the illness which eventually, in the form of General Paralysis brought on by syphilis, finished his career',[106] though some doubt has been cast on this widely accepted view by recent medical analysis of the surviving evidence.[107] Whatever the cause, it was a 'terrible public death'[108] that he suffered in 1895 at the age of forty-six.

The tragic circumstances stirred poignant memories throughout the Primrose League. It declared, 'We have sent a wreath, but we ourselves are this wreath'.[109] It was a touching sentimental flourish in recognition of a founding father who had briefly captured the imagination of Tories throughout the country in an unprecedented fashion. He claimed to have a big idea – Tory democracy – but never defined it coherently, admitting in private that it was 'chiefly opportunism'.[110] Among MPs who disliked him he was seen as an 'unprincipled adventurer copying Dizzy'.[111] Queen Victoria opposed his appointment as Chancellor of the Exchequer in July 1886 because she thought him 'so mad and odd'.[112] The whole political world was amazed by his behaviour at the end of 1886. 'Everyone agrees Lord Randolph never meant to resign and is furious at being taken at his word, quarrelling too with all the newspaper editors, not wise'.[113] He was certainly utterly unpredictable as he sought a path to the premiership, moving fast because he expected his life to be short. Along the way he rather casually invented a new political institution, the Primrose League, which turned out to be an invaluable gift to the Conservative Party.

66 Robert Rhodes James, *Lord Randolph Churchill* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959), p. 126.
67 W.S. Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, Vol. I, p.258.
68 Ibid., pp 258-9.
69 Letter from Rowland Winn to Northcote, n.d. [but January 1884], quoted in Richard Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury 1881-1902* (Longman, 1996), p.33.
70 Bahlman (ed.), *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton*, Vol. 2, p.575.
71 Ibid., p.581.
72 Quoted in Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury*, p.31.
73 Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.6.
74 Arthur James, First Earl of Balfour, *Chapters of Autobiography* (Cassell, 1930), pp 152-3.
75 The Hon. Mrs Gell, *Under Three Reigns 1860-1920* (Kegan Paul, 1927), p.135.
76 Ralph Nevill (ed.), *Leaves from the Note-Books of Lady Dorothy Nevill* (Macmillan, 1907), p.20.
77 Louis J. Jennings (ed.), *Speeches of The Right Honourable Lord Randolph Churchill, M.P. 1880-1888*, Vol. I (Longmans, Green and Co., 1889), pp 112-14.
78 Quoted in Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.139.
79 Ibid., p.110.

80 Lady Gwendolen Cecil, *Biographical Studies of the Life and Political Character of Robert Third Marquis of Salisbury* (privately printed, n.d.), p.8.
81 Quoted in Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.110.
82 Jennings (ed.), *Speeches of Lord Randolph Churchill*, Vol. I, p.201.
83 Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury*, p.34.
84 Ibid., p.44.
85 Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.133.
86 'It is often rumoured that Jennie, aged thirty-two, and the portly forty-five-year-old Prince now indulged in a physical relationship. And maybe they did. But there is no proof' (Anna Sebba, *Jennie Churchill: Winston's American Mother*, John Murray, 2007, p.153).More recently, Celia and John Lee have claimed that they had 'sexual relations' (*The Churchills: A Family Portrait*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p.86).The Churchills' descendants disagree among themselves about these matters.
87 Mrs George Cornwallis-West, *The Reminiscences of Lady Randolph Churchill* (Edward Arnold, 1908), p.98. (George Cornwallis-West was her second, not very suitable husband.)
88 Ibid., p.125.
89 Mrs Cornwallis-West to Lady Gwendolen Cecil, n.d. [but February 1902], Churchill Papers, CHAR 28/51/3,Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.
90 Leonard Jerome to Jennie Churchill, n.d. [but 28 February 1886], Churchill Papers, CHAR 28/1/46-8.
91 Duchess of Marlborough to Jennie Churchill, 3 November [1885], Churchill Papers, CHAR 28/42/44-5.
92 W.S. Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, Vol. I, pp 467-8.
93 Mrs Cornwallis-West, *Reminiscences of Lady Randolph Churchill*, p.129.
94 Ibid.
95 'To a Primrose League Committee this morning where the most curious battle [took place], the Duchess of Marlborough absolutely refusing to sign an address to Lady Salisbury to be presented to her on the occasion of her visit to the Crystal Palace next week … How Lord Randolph can imagine he improves his position by playing such pranks I do not know' (Lady Knightley's Journal, 19 July 1887 (Gordon (ed.), *Politics and Society: The Journals of Lady Knightley*, p.145)).
96 Ibid., p.161.
97 Ibid., p.303.
98 Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury*, p.117.
99 Margaret Elizabeth Foster, *Churchill's Grandmama: Frances, 7th Duchess of Marlborough* (The History Press, 2010), p.148.
100 Primrose League Papers, MS. 10, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
101 Preface to *The Primrose League: How Ladies Can Help It* (1885).
102 Jennings (ed.), *Speeches of Lord Randolph Churchill*, Vol. I, p.209.
103 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 28 June 1886, quoted in Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.411.

104 Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.135.
105 Lord Rosebery, *Lord Randolph Churchill* (Arthur L. Humphreys, 1908), p.181.
106 Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.59.
107 See Celia and John Lee, *Winston & Jack: The Churchill Brothers* (privately printed, 2007), pp 146-55. Winston Churchill had no doubts. Towards the end of his life he told his private secretary, 'You know my father died of locomotorataxia, the child of syphilis' (Anthony Montague Browne, *Long Sunset: Memoirs of Winston Churchill's Last Private Secretary*, Cassell, 1995, p.122).
108 Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.378.
109 Quoted in Robb, *The Primrose League*, p.48. His wife was deluged with letters and resolutions expressing sympathy (Churchill Papers, CHAR 28/56).
110 Quoted in Foster, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.107.
111 Quoted in A.B. Cooke and John Vincent, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain 1885-86* (Harvester Press, 1974), p.264. (I traded as A.B. Cooke in the 1970s and as Alistair B. Cooke for some years thereafter to avoid confusion with my world famous namesake. But I eventually I decided to do as I preferred.)
112 Queen Victoria's Journal, 24-25 July 1886, quoted in Cooke and Vincent, *The Governing Passion*, p.446.
113 Lady Knightley's Journal, 30 January 1887 (Gordon (ed.), *Politics and Society: The Journals of Lady Knightley*, p.110).

IV. THE LARGEST POLITICAL ORGANISATION IN BRITAIN

By 1885 the Primrose League had the great satisfaction of knowing that it had struck fear into the hearts of its Liberal opponents. A handbook published to assist Liberal Party workers at the 1885 election referred in awed tones to the League's 'widespread membership and ceaseless activity. It possesses a large revenue; it commands the patronage and support of men and women of high position and vast influence; it is resolute, spectacular, defiant'.[114] Some Liberals felt that they needed a league of their own (perhaps with Gladstone as its patron saint); a number of attempts were made to create one, but none of them succeeded. In the end the Liberals decided to put their faith high-mindedly in political education and the cultivation of 'an enlightened and elevating influence'[115] in political affairs as opposed to the more earthy instincts of Toryism expressed in the League. Their fate was to watch their new political foe become ever more formidable. Randolph Churchill's original private Primrose army, some 11,000 strong in March 1885, turned out to be just the advance guard of a mighty political host. Membership of the League increased nearly twentyfold to reach 200,000 by the spring of 1886; it then leapt to over half a million in the next twelve months and to double that number by March 1891.

The Primrose cause had been embraced by a million Tories, the majority of them working class, just eight years after the unveiling of Disraeli's statue at Westminster had first put the idea of establishing the League in the minds of Churchill and his Tory rebel associates. It was a truly spectacular record of growth.

After this first, fevered rush the ranks of the League continued to swell, though at a less exuberant rate. In 1910, when the total electorate stood at 7.7 million, it boasted proudly that it had two million people (many of them without the right to vote but keen to get it) under its Primrose banners, but membership had in fact almost certainly peaked at a slightly lower level a few years earlier. The League's central office showed a marked disinclination to note resignations and deaths properly.[116]

The overall position was nevertheless clear enough. Churchill's gift to politics had become one of the most remarkable phenomena of all time, 'the largest voluntary mass movement in British political history'.[117] It outnumbered the membership of the Conservative Party itself, to which, after its initial phase in Churchill's personal entourage, it gave its loyal support, as well as the worried Liberals whom it opposed so resolutely. That was the firm opinion of independent experts at the time: the Parties themselves kept no formal membership records.

The League was the most socially inclusive organisation the world had so far seen. All types of conditions of men – and women – rushed to join it: the high and the lowly, masters and servants, businessmen and employees, landlords and tenants, factory hands and agricultural workers, parents and children, Protestants and Catholics. The door was barred only to 'atheists and enemies of the British Empire'.[118] In a country deeply divided by sectarian strife as well as by class selfishness, the League stood as a haven of tolerance where all religious denominations and all classes were welcome. By bridging the class divide, the League claimed to have created 'a feeling of respect and sympathy for the virtues, the struggles and the aspirations of those born to a life of toil' and showed the less fortunate that 'people who by accident of birth are rich or highly placed are not the soul-less, selfish beings depicted by the [Liberal] political stump-orator'.[119] Primrose League publicists were not slow to congratulate themselves on the grounds that members 'are all equal at the meetings', making the League the embodiment of 'one of the finest ideas of breaking down caste and levelling up ever invented'.[120] All were enjoined to proclaim class unity. 'One of the chief duties incumbent on every Primrose centre is to combat and destroy the Radical fallacy that in modern politics classes are antagonistic. The League, on the contrary, brings

all classes together. All vote [on League issues] on a footing of absolute equality, and meet on terms of the truest fraternity'.[121] (Equality and fraternity – those hallowed revolutionary watchwords – were now claimed by this great movement of the right.) The League kept this fine, high-minded ideal constantly before it.

The League was a kind of gigantic political Noah's Ark, minus the animals, with every group in British society represented in abundance (rather than in pairs). Its avowed intention at the outset was to 'embrace all classes and creeds'[122]: no organisation ever fulfilled its original prospectus more successfully or so quickly. By 1886 the first small central office in the Strand had been replaced by 'extensive premises' in Victoria Street (though they were rather smaller than the massive concrete and plate glass Westminster City Hall which occupies the site today). 'A vast staff of employees [were] occupied in sorting and attempting to cope with masses of correspondence from all parts of the country'.[123] Like every central office maintained for political purposes it was not greatly loved. It was frequently criticised as expensive and inefficient: anyone who has ever worked in a political headquarters will be familiar with the almost inevitable charges (and with the impossibility of turning critics into admirers). At regional level the organisation seems to have been admirably trim. Overall, the League's revenue, which was never as vast as the envious Liberals of 1885 fondly imagined, was divided very unequally between the centre and the membership at large – to the advantage of the latter. Subscriptions paid by members locally to their own branches (known as habitations) – typically two shillings and sixpence (12.5p) by the relatively affluent knights and dames (the League's most famous standard-bearers) and no more than a few pence by ordinary members (called associates) with the very poor often being let off entirely – were spent in the areas where they were raised, while the funds collected at the centre through separate subscriptions from knights and dames (with the wealthiest contributing the most) were sufficient to cover the costs of the unloved central office and to assist Primrose propaganda work on behalf of the Tories in the constituencies (two million leaflets were distributed in one typical year, 1891). The richer localities helped the poorer ones. There were no resources to spare for centrally inspired recruitment campaigns.

The League spread like wildfire in the late 1880s when the issue of Irish Home Rule roused fierce Party political feeling throughout the country, because so many

responded with spontaneous enthusiasm to what it represented: a new start for popular Toryism and a rejection of the existing local Conservative associations because they did not 'suit the popular taste' and had not succeeded 'in joining all classes together for political objects'.[124] The League was an extraordinary movement that swept through the country, drawing Tories of all social classes together and organising them in larger numbers than had ever been previously seen, to undertake voluntary work on a wide scale in the Conservative interest – something which itself had never been done before. It adapted itself to the differing social characteristics of local communities. As one of the League's principal spokesmen explained in 1886, habitations 'may keep within small limits or extend themselves, as some have done, to thousands, according to the necessities of the town or county in which they are situate'.[125] Flexibility was the key to success. It was, in today's unlovely jargon, a 'bottom-up' organisation.

> The habitation in a Welsh mining village which might contain a dozen houses and a church necessarily offered its members something quite different from the activities of a habitation in a London borough such as Bayswater, Kensington or Southwark. One rural habitation covered an area of one hundred square miles where 2,000 of the population of 7,000 were in the Primrose League organisation, and its membership reflected the social pattern of landlord, farmer, and farm labourer. In contrast were the Brighton Dames with their comfortable incomes and socially uniform middle-aged membership, or the rich Victoria habitation in London which raised money for poorer habitations. A habitation in West Lothian contained 1,000 miners; one in Derwent Valley was composed predominantly of coal miners; in Bolton, where an average of four thousand attended Primrose League gatherings, artisans and factory workers formed most of the membership.[126]

All of them in their different ways were bases of Tory action, not just at election time but continuously year by year. No wonder the Liberals with a

smaller, less flexible collection of local bases at its disposal, provided by formal constituency associations, viewed the League with such apprehension and anxiety. 'It created fortresses of Tory strength in urban districts, which Liberals until then had claimed for their own. It maintained the [traditional] Conservative power in rural districts at a period when rural distress threatened to disrupt [it]'.[127] It was the League which was at the head of the wholly unexpected advance of Toryism after 1885 in urban and (even more importantly over the longer term) suburban constituencies ('villas outside London are the principal seed-plots of Conservatism',[128] Salisbury said in 1900) at a time when the extension of the franchise to agricultural labourers and rural England's sudden plunge into economic hardship as a result of cheap, refrigerated food imports had endangered Toryism's centuries-old predominance in the countryside. At all times, and in all places, it was through class unity that the League worked its magic. Lady Knightley, wife of a long-serving Northamptonshire MP, noted proudly that the meeting at which she was elected Dame President of her local habitation, was 'thoroughly representative, beginning with Colonel Lowndes, and going down to Bagley the chimneysweep'.[129]

The League boasted that it could mobilise Tory supporters anywhere. Unlike so many political claims, this one was well-founded. Examples of conspicuous success, often against the odds, abound in the careful analysis of 2,300 habitations throughout the country carried out by the academic authority on the League, Dr Martin Pugh.[130] The long-established natural leaders of Toryism were not found wanting. In rural areas, the lords of broad acres stepped forward to become ruling councillors, as the chairmen of the League's habitations were known. 'West Dorset's huge membership (5,800) reflected the extensive habitations around Melbury, led by the Earl and Countess of Ilchester, and Bridport under Sir Molyneaux and Lady Nepean … In the Wilton division [of Wiltshire] the Earl of Pembroke, owner of 42,000 acres, and his wife were instrumental in keeping the seat out of Liberal hands from 1892 to 1906'.[131] The gracious condescension of the grandees towards the League was widely mocked, particularly by Liberals anxious to weaken the organisation which they feared. In a phrase that became well-known, Herbert Gladstone, son of the Liberal leader, represented it as a snobbish outfit 'only fit for duchesses and scullery maids'[132] (generally quoted as 'duchesses and

dairy maids' for alliterative effect). A leading member of the League immediately retorted that any organisation which 'enabled duchesses and scullery maids to meet on equal terms was of the greatest value'.[133] Not all dukes, however, were as assiduous in the League as their wives were reputed to be. The Duke of Portland was invited to join 'because they were hoping for a good subscription – which they received! So I became a Knight Harbinger of the Primrose League, though to this day I have no notion what that means, except that I received an illuminated parchment certificate'.[134]

Most of the upper classes did their duty. Other local notables, drawn from the middle classes, followed the aristocratic lead, and from the start women were prominent amongst them. 'In East Hertford the Marquis of Hertford provided the figurehead for the eight habitations, while in the West Watford division the wife of the local MP, J.F. Halsey of Great Gaddesden, organised a huge central habitation which grew from 3,600 in 1888 to 5,000 by 1900'.[135] Political life in the four constituencies in Surrey was enriched by 'an impressive network of habitations worked by leisured middle-class ladies and often graced by aristocratic families'.[136] In the 'villadoms' of the London suburbs, like Hackney and Walthamstow, and outlying towns, such as Harrow and Croydon, formidable Primrose dames dispatched legions of willing workers to pinpoint every Tory voter in every single street. Seven habitations and over 2,500 League members kept Croydon Tory at every election apart from in that utterly disastrous year for the Conservative Party, 1906.

The dames were often the architects of Tory victories in the most unlikely places. The Bristol South seat included much poverty in the Bedminster district. 'Under Miss Mabel Hill the Bedminster habitation grew to 940 in 1891 and 1,600 in 1892, almost wholly drawn from local working-class families … By tackling the most intractable element in South Bristol, the League tipped it into Conservative hands in 1886, 1892, 1895 and 1900'.[137] It was the same story in the industrial areas of the north. In Yorkshire, Bradford's three seats with their large working-class electorates were all won by the Tories in 1895 and 1900 with the powerful assistance of the town's 4,000 League members. In Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where League habitations 'covered all parts from the poverty of St Andrews to the

villadom of Jesmond'[138] with a total membership of some 6,000 by 1893, the Tories had ejected Liberals from both the city's two seats by 1895. The heartlands of the cotton industry around Manchester were just as susceptible to the League's wide appeal. 'Rochdale, despite its radical traditions, contained 4,000 League members led by Mrs Royds, the wife of Clement Royds who won the seat in 1895 and 1900. Bolton, which had 1,800 members in 1888, saw a remarkable leap forward in the late 1890s when the habitation eventually topped the 6,000 mark; Conservatives took at least one and often both the seats'.[139] But a prospect of victory, agreeable though that was, did not provide the essential stimulus for action. Very large habitations flourished in rock-solid Liberal constituencies which the Tories had no chance of winning. They created a deep sense of Tory community which was to last until the latter part of the twentieth century, sustaining strong Conservative associations in hopeless seats.

In Wales the ever flexible League produced literature in the Welsh language to be used alongside English at habitation meetings, though it flourished most conspicuously in seats where a sense of British identity was strongest. Only Scotland proved infertile territory for the League. In the countryside the lairds failed to play their part: in industrial areas, particularly around Glasgow, the intense sectarian strife stoked by Irish Home Rule was exploited by the Orange Order on behalf of the Tories (as it was too on Merseyside with its large Irish immigrant communities). There, no room existed for the League's healing social message. 'In Scotland, alone in mainland Britain, large areas evidently remained untouched'.[140] Eleswhere, most communities, whatever their social complexion, had at least one thriving Primrose League habitation. In many places, it was difficult to set foot outside the door without bumping into a standard-bearer of the League, leaflet in one hand and canvasser's card in the other. Its great power was recognised on every side. 'It has been the frank and universal admission of successful Conservative candidates that they have been lifted into Parliament by the League'.[141] That tribute came from a particularly satisfactory source – the leader of the Liberal women's suffrage movement, Millicent Fawcett. The compliments offered by opponents are the sweetest in political life.

*

It was the Primrose League therefore which in electoral terms sustained the long political ascendancy of the Tories under the great Lord Salisbury that began in the mid-1880s and lasted until the first years of the twentieth century when it was suddenly wrecked by Joe Chamberlain's bitterly divisive campaign for tariff reform. Until then Tory rule, with brief Liberal interruptions, seemed destined to last forever. For generations Conservatives had been accustomed to losing most general elections: at the very end of the nineteenth century they suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves on a long winning streak, thanks to the votes garnered by the League as it proclaimed the Tory faith in areas where it had never been heard effectively before.

How exactly did the League's spectacular success impinge on the Conservative Party and its organisation? It advanced with the full blessing of the Party leaders. As soon as its inestimable value became apparent, it received the seal of official approval: the suspicions that stemmed from its Churchillian origins evaporated completely. In 1885 Salisbury and the unfortunate, ill-starred Northcote, now in his last months as joint leader,* placed themselves at the head of the League. Gently teasing his new associates for their love of antique titles, Salisbury joked 'I suppose we shall have no such commonplace name [as patrons]. What do you say to Vavasours?'[142] They assumed office styled, rather less obscurely, Grand Masters of the League rejecting medieval in favour of masonic overtones, in which the League also delighted. An official connection between the League and the Party leaders was established which lasted with some interruptions until the 1980s, Alec Douglas-Home serving as the last Grand Master.

* Humiliation pursued Northcote to the grave. The man who in 1881 had, with the Queen's encouragement, confidently expected to be the next Conservative Prime Minister was given the grand but empty title of First Lord of the Treasury when Salisbury formed his first government in June 1885. No significant powers were attached to the post. 'The Queen's passing me over without a word of sympathy or regret is not pleasant', Northcote wrote miserably in his diary. At Churchill's insistence he lost the leadership of the House of Commons and was dispatched to the Lords as Earl of Iddesleigh – a snub for which the phrase 'kicked upstairs' was invented. Appointed Foreign Secretary in July 1886, he was relieved of the post six months later. After clearing his desk on 12 January 1887 he walked over to No. 10 where he died of a heart attack in front of Salisbury. The latter wrote, 'As I looked upon the dead body stretched before me, I felt that politics was a cursed profession'. (Quotations are from Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan*, Phoenix paperback edition, 2000, pp 325, 427.) A recent short account of Northcote's career does little to redeem his reputation (see Nigel Thomas Keohane, 'The Lost Leader: Sir Stafford Northcote and the Leadership of the Conservative Party' in *Parliamentary History*, Vol.27 (2008), pp 361-79).

The League presented the Conservative leadership with a most welcome alternative to its own official Party organisation which had signally failed to develop to its satisfaction. It had hoped for a network of loyal and dynamic constituency institutions linked together by the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations established in Disraeli's day; what it got was a bewildering array of bodies which the National Union was unable to co-ordinate effectively. Some were hardly able to discharge their core function: the registration of voters. Others in urban areas brought working-class men together for undemanding social activities, despite Disraeli's distaste for organisations that separated one class from the others. 'Even in boroughs with larger electorates, where democratic organisation ought to have been most advanced, there was little sign that the forces of Conservatism were represented by single all-embracing bodies to which parliamentary candidates might have felt a sense of responsibility'.[143]

That did not matter all that much in the conditions that existed up until the mid-1880s. Thanks to fat cheques from rich grandees, willing hands could be paid to do all the work that arose among an electorate that was then around three million. But in the 1880s the soaring costs reached levels that were denounced as 'scandalous'[144] by John Gorst, the Tories' chief election expert and leading associate of Randolph Churchill.* The £1.74 million spent at the 1880 election (over £80 million in today's values) was indeed a colossal sum. Assailed (not for the last time) as a pit of corruption, Parliament took effective action by means of the Corrupt Practices Act 1883 to purify the system through the introduction of strict limits on election expenditure.

The measures worked. The cost of the 1910 general election was nearly £1 million less than the 'scandalous' 1880 contest. The paid hands disappeared. No longer were canvassers 'engaged to go round and ask the electors how they intended to vote, in some cases in such excessive numbers that they could find

* According to Gorst, everyone was on the take. 'Boys and girls old enough to display the party colours and shout out praise or abuse in doggerel verse to popular melodies, all found congenial employment in the election contest at wages more than double the amount that could be earned in any regular and useful branch of industry' (quoted in H.J. Hanham, *The Nineteenth Century Constitution: Documents and Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, 1969, p.292).

nothing to do but meet in public-houses and canvass one another.'[145] Yet at precisely this moment the amount of real work to be done increased dramatically: two million more people gained the right to vote in 1884 and the electoral map was completely redrawn for the first time since the middle ages, with new single-member constituencies being created on a wide scale. 'Very few existing constituencies were left undisturbed'.[146]

There was no effective response to the challenge from the Tories' constituency associations. They were uninterested in finding the unpaid Tory legions on whom everything would now depend. 'By and large the Party kept its rank and file supporters at arm's length by avoiding a low or even uniform membership subscription … Not until the 1920s did the party move towards a formal system of membership and a low entrance fee … Few [associations] had a genuinely mass membership and many remained purely nominal'.[147] A sense of despair gripped some of the Party leaders. W.H. Smith, known inevitably as 'the bookstall man', wrote to Salisbury bewailing the absence of 'eager volunteers in canvassing or organisation. The machinery of an election has had to be provided at somebody's cost hitherto, and much of this will be prohibited in future. The result will be I am afraid that we shall not poll anything approaching our strength'.[148]

It was at exactly this moment that the Primrose League came into existence. The hour called forth the heroes (and heroines) who swiftly banished the Party leaders' anxieties about the future. The League more than made up for the deficiencies of the lacklustre constituency associations with their complacent, oligarchic structures and limited funds. Looking – just for once – beyond his own immediate interests, Churchill predicted that the League would prove an immense boon to the Party in the new conditions that it faced. In a letter written at the Carlton in December 1883, he made clear his confidence that the League would help answer W.H. Smith's grave concerns:

> Voluntary political effort at & between elections has hitherto been conspicuous by its absence in the Tory Party; since the Corrupt Practices Act it has become more necessary than ever, & the League has been founded with the object of supplying this kind of effort to some extent.[149]

'To some extent', said Churchill: for once he was unduly modest, as the League's remarkable diligence throughout the land was to show from the 1880s to the First World War.

In the League people paid to work – hard. The small subscriptions of the ordinary members or associates, and the larger sums contributed by the grander knights and dames, sustained a nationwide organisation that gave its adherents little peace throughout the year (not that many of them minded that). Their heavy obligations were spelt out clearly and firmly in the statutes of the League issued on 1 February 1886:

> Every Member of the Habitation, unless engaged at the time in other Conservative duties, shall be willing to place himself, as far as possible, at the disposal of the Council [of his habitation], for the execution of political work, especially in actively and energetically canvassing any sub-district to which he may be appointed, so as to acquaint himself perfectly with the social position, influence, and political views of every elector within the said district; he shall also keep himself well informed of all political movements within the district, and shall at all times be especially watchful of the organisation and proceedings of the opposite party … Every Member shall further assist as an active worker the local Conservative Association of the district where he resides … Every Member shall endeavour to see that all adherents in his district are placed on the Register of Voters, and shall furnish a list of such persons to the Secretary or Ruling Councillor of the Habitation … Every Member, if required, shall report, either in person or by letter (as may be most convenient to him), the results of his labour and observation … During the progress of a contested Election, it shall be the duty of Members to use the most urgent efforts to bring up voters to the poll. They must be most careful not to violate the provisions of the Corrupt Practices Act; upon any violation of which, *ipso facto*, a Member ceases to belong to the League.[150]

This was not an organisation for the half-hearted. Failure to attend habitation meetings which, the statutes decreed, should be held at least once a month (and preferably weekly), made a member 'liable to have his name struck off the Register of the Habitation'.[151] The League's central office employed a team of lecturers, some of whom were always from a working-class background, to bear word of national political developments to habitation meetings around the country. The League required members of habitations to deliver reports on their work in canvassing and recruiting for the cause: no other Tory organisation has ever dared to do that. Everyone had to be ready to serve a specific district or sub-district within a habitation, subject to the orders of wardens and sub-wardens, many of whom had working-class occupations and wore their own special badges of office with particular pride.

After the fashion of the time the League made no explicit reference in its statutes to the women who constituted around half of its members: the pronoun 'he' covered both sexes. But it was only in its formal language that it failed to acknowledge the presence of women who were crucial to its success in so many constituencies and who took charge of the running of so many habitations, most of which were mixed with only a small and steadily diminishing number consisting of women alone. The honours of the League were showered upon them: special orders of merit for the dames and clasps both for them and women associates denoting triumphs in particular elections. 'The first badge of honour for special service given by the League was conferred on a woman in the West of England, whose daily bread depended on her labour, but who had devoted all her spare time to the cause, and who had richly deserved the honour by her conspicuous services'.[152] She was the first of the League's honoured and decorated female millions over the ensuing decades. Deserving men were not neglected: they too were recognised under the Grand Council of the League's decree that 'for arduous and special services clasps [were] to be attached to the badges'.[153]

Such an organisation with zealous members thick on the ground under the close supervision of district and sub-district wardens was in a position to note the fall of every leaf. One of the League's leaders boasted: 'I could name counties, such as Suffolk and Hampshire, where the network of Habitations is so complete that

every vote in every house in the various electoral divisions is accounted for'.[154] The habitations recorded 'all deaths, departures or arrivals so that the Registration may be carefully kept up by the Conservative Association'.[155] Registration needed such care: before the arrival of universal manhood suffrage in 1918 (extended to all women over 21 in 1929), there were nine different ways in which men could qualify to vote in county seats and six in the boroughs, all having a property element.

The Primrose dames proved particularly adept at tracking down those eligible for registration as lodgers. The lodger franchise 'proved an embarrassing option for respectable families in that it involved exposing the trivial details of one's personal life to examination in the Revision Courts'.[156] The charm and persistence of the dames helped overcome their reluctance to register in the first place and to prove entitlement annually thereafter as they were required to do. The outcome of many elections was decided by these Primrose-registered lodgers who were kept up to the mark in outlying places by dames on bicycling expeditions organised by local representatives of the League's special bicycling corps (with, inevitably, its own array of badges) which was established in the 1890s as a further means of harnessing the ladies' enthusiasm.[157] In due course the bicycles were superseded by the result of the next transport revolution: in June 1909 the League's Grand Council 'received a request for a Motor Car Badge from the Altrincham Habitation where they have formed a Primrose Motor Corps'.[158]

The joys of this new world of voluntary canvassing were fostered by promoting vigorous competition within habitations. At Bayham on the Sussex/Kent border, five wardens – 'two gentlemen and three working men' – were appointed in each of nineteen parishes in consultation with 'the leading Conservative (not necessarily drawn from the gentry)' in every one. 'Their canvassing books were most strictly kept and submitted to a monthly meeting of the Officers of the Habitation, when, besides the business, the numbers were given out, the rivalry between the different parishes being one of the chief elements of success … The result exceeded any anticipation'.[159] Throughout the League individual triumphs in such endeavours were acknowledged by the award of clasps marking out the wearer as a Primrose champion. The collective triumphs of habitations were

recognised by the presentation of champion banners to them. These rewards were eagerly sought. 'Competition for the Champion Banner grows keener each year', the Grand Council noted happily in May 1909.[160] Yet throughout the entire period up to the First World War, the League's Grand Council in London was constantly sent news of great labours that sought no reward. In February 1909, for example, when spirits seemed to be tiring in some places, the Council was immensely heartened by glad tidings from 'Broadway in Dorset [providing] an instance of what a working man can do. Mr Troth, the Hon. Secretary, is a retired lighthouse man, simply brimming over with patriotism. He goes into the rich man's and poor man's houses and makes them join. Started last year, [and covering] only a village, the membership stands at 180 associates and 23 knights and dames'.[161] In the end it was the boundless enthusiasm of Mr Troth and so many others like him which made the League the most successful, as well as the largest, political organisation in Britain.

For thirty years the League brought the Tories election victories while the Party's constituency associations languished. 'Both numerically and in terms of social breadth the League comprised the popular wing of Conservatism'.[162] But though the League eclipsed the official Party organisation, it did not disdain its structures and their representatives. The League's statutes instructed everyone in the Primrose ranks to regard himself or herself as an active worker on behalf of the local Conservative association, enfeebled though it might be. At the very outset of the League all habitations were told to place themselves 'in communication with the authorities of the local Conservative Association'.[163] The Party's legendary Chief Agent, Captain 'Skipper' Middleton, arranged in September 1885 that 'the list of the Habitations of the Primrose League with the names and addresses of the Ruling Councillors be published in the new edition of the List of Conservative Associations'.[164] After the League's first general election in 1885, its Grand Council declared:

> It has ever been our wish to act in harmony with the local Conservative Associations, as well as with their Central Office, and to aid them in every way which they might suggest. Any jealousy which might have first have existed has

> been swept away by the loyal and hearty co-operation of the members of the League.[165]

Nothing could be less surprising: the League had the men and women to deliver the literature, to canvass the voters they had helped to place on the register and to bring them to the polls on behalf of the local association which, though starved of numbers, employed the crucial individual in the entire operation, the election agent. In the 1880s 'a new breed of party agents' came into existence with 'enhanced legal status and responsibilities' as part of a 'great social trend of middle-class professionalism characteristic of the later nineteenth century'.[166] By and large the new breed of agents quickly discovered how to make effective use of the rich resources placed at their disposal by the Primrose League. Inevitably some difficulties arose despite the Grand Council's conviction that all jealously had been overcome in 1885. But when problems occurred they were rarely of the League's making, as the 1900 election, for example, showed.

In 1900 the now highly experienced League received 'a large number of letters from Members of Parliament and others [thanking it] for assistance … The canvassing of [non-resident] outvoters was efficiently carried out by ladies and gentlemen from these [i.e. their London] offices under the direction of the Dowager Lady Westbury … Special election badges should be presented'. But the tale of triumph was marred by the behaviour of John Lowles who lost by just 24 votes one of the poorest constituencies in London, Shoreditch Haggerston, which he had won by 40 votes at the previous election in 1895. Lowles 'refused to have a Habitation though constantly urged to do so for four years past and consequently if the loss of the seat is due to want of Primrose League aid Mr Lowles alone is to blame. It is worthy of note', the League's report on the election continued, 'that in Central Hackney, a similar district, a Habitation was formed in March of this year, and the agent did not ask for any outside help, nor for any carriages, and the majority increased from 312 to over 1,500. Similar satisfactory results might be quoted in various districts, notably in Southport where the remarkable victory of the Unionist Party is attributed to the Waterloo district and the work done by the Waterloo Habitation which was only formed in November 1899'.[167] The vigorous efforts of the League could turn defeat into victory; a

lack of them brought unnecessary loss. But the difficulties that arose could not dent the League's commitment to the Tory cause. As another contest began to loom nine years later, the Primrose foot-soldiers were recalled to duty: 'Every Ruling Councillor and Hon. Secretary should remember that from the moment the General Election commences until it is over they will be asked by the Unionist [the word Conservative had fallen out of use] candidate to provide a band of workers'.[168]

The Party leadership felt doubly blessed. Not only had it acquired an immensely effective mass Tory organisation just when it needed one; it was also asked to give little in return. Despite their widespread feebleness the official constituency associations represented collectively by their National Union constantly sought to influence policy from the 1880s onwards. They wanted subsidies for housing and tough controls on immigration. The Party leadership indignantly repudiated their counsel: policy-making was not something to be shared with the rank and file. The League by blissful contrast was only too anxious to leave policy firmly in the hands of the leadership. As it proudly declared:

> No questions of the smaller current politics disturb its deliberations. These should tend only to the upholding of religion, constitution and empire, and necessarily embrace men of different tenets, united firmly in support of these cardinal principles.[169]

That 'splendid vagueness'[170] suited Lord Salisbury and his colleagues admirably. The 'extreme simplicity'[171] of the League's cardinal principles – the maintenance of religion, the constitution and empire – ensured perfect harmony. Everything that Conservative governments did was bound to be in happy conformity with such vague principles: and the League dutifully applauded their every deed. It defended 'the policies of the Conservative Party on all occasions with a blind regularity which at times tried even the patience of the *Morning Post*',[172] the newspaper which daily hailed its successes and concealed its blemishes. The League followed slavishly whatever happened to be the official line on the most controversial issues of the time, including the introduction of old age pensions, state involvement

in education and that great destroyer of Party unity, tariff reform. They were all regarded by the ultra-loyal League as 'questions of the smaller current politics'. Astonishingly, with women constituting around half the membership, it viewed women's suffrage as a smaller question too. Just occasionally, passions broke through. In March 1909 the Grand Council was alarmed to receive a letter from the Streatham habitation asking how it should deal with two suffragette members 'who were recently arrested whilst endeavouring to force an entrance into the Houses of Parliament'.[173] It was told to restore calm by whatever means it thought appropriate to prevent the League being embroiled in controversy. In order to campaign remorselessly in the Tory cause the League had to be united: and it preserved its unity by keeping out of political controversies. Nothing must be allowed to impede its mission.

So none of the tiresome challenges which often faced the leadership at the annual Party Conference organised by the National Union arose at the League's equivalent gathering, known as Grand Habitation, held at, or around, Primrose Day. Remarkable Primrose rituals, including hypnotism, preceded the speech of the Party leader which in Salisbury's time was always received with adulation.

> At the Crystal Palace in 1889, before an audience of over fourteen thousand, Lady Salisbury and Mr Balfour were preceded to the dais by ushers carrying Primrose wands and wearing silken sashes with scarlet League monograms and a procession of banners. Later an Elizabethan page presented a bouquet of primroses to Lady Salisbury while a ballet and a hypnotic performance followed [it would seem unlikely that Lady Salisbury herself was put in a trance].
>
> From a platform elaborately decorated with primroses and other spring flowers and blazing with a host of bright banners, and before a galaxy of Tory Knights and Dames displaying their League brooches, badges and pendants, the Party leader, after a few references to the League, seized the occasion to deliver a message of some significance to the

> party and to the country … Lord Salisbury always evoked much applause from the Primrose audiences by stressing the role of the League in awakening imperialistic sentiment, as well as in its practical work for the party.[174]

The League's annual mass meeting in April 1891 filled the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. 'It was a magnificent sight, that great theatre crammed from top to bottom, the whole audience rising to cheer Lord Salisbury and to sing God Save the Queen, Lady Radnor with her lovely voice taking the first two verses. Lord S. spoke extremely well, a thoughtful statesman-like speech'.[175] Eight years later the Albert Hall was the venue: 'it is a splendid thing to see 10,000 people gathered … with no special effort'.[176]

Salisbury's nephew Arthur Balfour, who succeeded him as leader in 1902, rarely rose to the same rhetorical heights. But when he lauded the achievements of 'our glorious Empire, and our historic Navy'* at the Grand Habitation meeting in 1899, his audience 'so long quiescent, responded with an enthusiastic shout of approval'.[177] *Imperium et Libertas* was the League's motto: it always seemed to be mainly concerned with the progress of *Imperium.* Its official publication, *The Primrose League Gazette,* proclaimed that it worked for 'the greatness of the Empire and the welfare of the people' – in that order.[178] Salisbury articulated those sentiments with power and eloquence, though he deplored the jingoistic fervour which gripped the League in the 1890s. Salisbury's guiding principles were always ' the security and honour of England … The claims of his country did in fact control him absolutely'.[179]

After the immortal Disraeli, Salisbury with his imperial rallying-cries became the greatest Primrose hero, as the memory of the founder, Randolph Churchill, faded. It was not a position that filled Salisbury with intense delight. The League's endless attentions swiftly palled.

* Members of the League loved to intone the following verse from the *Book for Baby Patriots:* 'N is for Navy / We keep at Spithead / It is a sight that makes foreigners / Wish they were dead'.

> I am a victim of resolutions. Two or three years ago it was only Conservative Associations – that was bad enough. But since the Primrose League has taken this astonishing extension, every habitation thinks it necessary at every crisis to assure us of its unabated confidence: and I have to assure them that I received the assurance with sincere gratification. Touching at first – almost idyllic: but very tiresome when you come to your hundredth letter.[180]

(Two years earlier, he had written: 'When I die … my epitaph must be "Died of writing inane letters to empty-headed Conservative Associations". It is a miserable death to look forward to'.[181] The torrent of Primrose resolutions must have deepened the sense of impending misery at the last trump.

The unfailingly loyal Primrose Leaguers would have been distressed if they had known that Salisbury found their ardent support rather trying. It was even more fortunate that they were unaware that one of their own most trusted leaders, Algernon Borthwick (later ennobled despite Salisbury's objections as Lord Glenesk*, who appeared so staunch in public, had disparaged them in private conversation with the Earl of Derby, who had deserted Disraeli and joined Gladstone's Cabinet. 'Borthwick gave me an amusing account of the Primrose League, of which he is one of the founders', Derby recorded in his diary on 16 May 1888: 'his way of talking would have astonished the believers in it and him, but would not be fair to set down'.[182] Sadly it is not uncommon for the tireless endeavours of activists to be mocked privately by those who benefit from them and most certainly want them to endure. Salisbury, who found the Primrose attentions so tiresome, wrote anxiously to Jennie Churchill in 1890 asking for a supply of badges and diplomas, fearful that undecorated members might lose faith in the Tory cause.[183] (It is a measure of his concern that he should have broached

* Borthwick, owner of the *Morning Post*, the leading Tory (and Primrose-supporting) newspaper, was on extremely bad terms with the Tory leader and Primrose hero. Sir Reginald Talbot 'explained to me the history of the violent antagonism of the *Morning Post* to the whole house of Cecil. Lord Salisbury would not make Sir Algernon Borthwick a peer! It was done at last on Queen Victoria's own initiation' (Lady Knightley's Journal, 9 January 1911, printed in Gordon (ed., *Politics and the Society: The Journals of Lady Knightely,* p.476. Rancour is rarely absent from the upper reaches of the Tory Party.

the matter with the wife of the man with whom he had parted company in acrimonious circumstances in 1886.)

Unaware of unkindness on high, the League was conscious of only one significant failure during the years of its glory before 1914. It was turned down by the Empire in which it believed so strongly. No organisation had a greater thirst for information about the vast tracts coloured red on the map. 'Three hundred members of Ribblesdale (Settle) Habitation fortified themselves with tea before settling down to a two-hour lecture on the colonies which comprised one hundred limelight views … The lurid images thrown up by these slides provided their window on a mysterious and exciting world'.[184] That world declined to have a sustained direct connection with them. The League set out in the 1880s declaring that 'habitations shall be established in any district of the British Empire by warrant from the Ruling [later Grand] Council',[185] though natives 'should not be encouraged'.[186] At first the Empire seemed ready to answer the call: by Primrose Day 1887 habitations had been formed in India, Australia, Cyprus, Malta, Hong Kong and Mauritius.[187] But they did not become enduring links in a great Primrose imperial chain, strengthening the unity of the Empire. No trace of them remained in 1900 when Grand Council ruled that 'it is inexpedient for habitations to be formed in the colonies'.[188] Ten years later pleas from loyal Canada left it unmoved: a proposal to establish a Primrose presence there was deemed 'impracticable'.[189] Did this unexpected drawing apart represent in miniature a prominent theme in imperial history: the disinclination of British colonists to welcome arrangements designed for them in England?

Undeterred the wider Empire's cold shoulder, the League made the most determined efforts to plant itself successfully in Ireland where Britain's supremacy, so vital in its view for the progress of the world, was under such grave threat. Surely the Primrose banners could help unite loyal British subjects and arrest the growth of Irish nationalism along with the widespread agrarian violence which accompanied it. By their own account the ladies of the League surpassed themselves in this great endeavour. By 1891 they were boasting that 'districts whose names have been associated in the popular mind with crime or treason alone, now appear as the abode of more or less flourishing habitations'.[190] Enemies of Britain were

being dislodged in Cork whose habitation had 1,607 members; in Limerick 800 had been recruited. In Galway over 1,000 sat down to tea at a League meeting. Reporting such events, the *Primrose League Gazette* gave its readers 'the impression that no Irishman wanted to break the union'.[191] The disillusionment that followed was the hardest thing that the League had to bear in this period of its greatest overall success. By 1909 there was only one Irish habitation left, in prosperous Kingstown outside Dublin.[192] Across almost the entire country outside Ulster, Irish nationalism carried all before it.

Though its own direct efforts might have been unavailing in far-flung regions and in Ireland, the League held firmly to its faith in Britain's imperial destiny. This was the flame, it believed, that Disraeli wanted it to tend for ever. Primrose habitations were inspired above all by heroic deeds in, and exciting pictorial images of, Empire. Boring details of policy did not concern them, much to the relief and delight of a Party leadership which, fortified by its Primrose admirers, cast aside the tiresome official Conservative organisation with its pretensions to interfere in what ought not to concern it. Devotion to simple ideals kept the Primrose armies at work for long hours. When work was done their members turned with equal enthusiasm to simple pleasures.

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'The trouble with socialism', Oscar Wilde famously declared, 'is that it would take too many evenings'. In this one respect the Primrose Leaguers closely resembled their hated socialist opponents: they too willingly surrendered evenings to their cause, and often cheerfully gave away weekends as well. But they filled up the time very differently. The socialists wrangled endlessly over points of doctrine and procedure in which the stalwarts of the League had absolutely no interest. The latter reported the results of long hours of canvassing, leafleting, voter registration and election preparations at their habitation meetings, held mainly in the myriad Conservative clubs with which Britain had been supplied since the 1860s. They submitted to instruction delivered by visiting lecturers who equipped them with a basic understanding of Conservative policy. But they looked above all for diversion which politics now brought into their lives for the first time. The League never

forgot the precept of its founder, Randolph Churchill, who believed that Tories would rather laugh than think.

Blessed with the Victorian virtue of self-help, members proved adept at organising their own evening entertainments, which their newspaper, the *Primrose League Gazette,* dutifully recorded. There might be 'a song by a local baker, next a violin solo offered by the librarian, and finally animal interpretations presented by the valet from the big house'.[193] Many habitations would have regarded such an evening as distinctly unambitious. Walworth in London boasted of the varied musical accomplishments of its members in 1888:

> The proceedings opened with a piano forte solo ably rendered by Miss Daisy Pitt, followed by the 'Death of Nelson' in Mr Prince's best style, Mrs Schwetzuebel next giving 'The New Kingdom', succeeded by a recitation 'Rubinstein's Piano' vociferously encored, in response to which Mr Gill facetiously rendered the 'Roman Guide'. A new song 'A Mother's Love' (Wellsbourne) was then ably rendered by Mrs Marshall, Mr Court following with 'Dreaming', succeeded by Mr Arthur Bantick with 'Queen of the Earth' and Mrs Kessell 'My Little Sweetheart' (both encored), Miss Mitchell closing the first part with 'Daddy', capitally rendered. During the interval Mr Philip Johns (Chairman) addressed the audience on behalf of the habitation … The second part of the programme was then proceeded with, Miss Daisy Pitt opening with a piano solo, 'Come back to Erin', followed by Mr H. Prince with 'Once Again' (encored), Mrs Schwetzuebel, 'I Dreamed a Dream', Mrs S. Kessell, 'Come into the Garden Maud' (encored), Mr Marshall, 'A Winter's Story', Mr Arthur Bantwick, 'Thy Sentinel Am I', all ably rendered, Miss Mitchell (a very promising little lady) concluding with 'I Shan't Go to School Any More' (encored).[194]

In this trite, self-satisfied account, no one falters: almost every item is either encored or 'capitally rendered'. Mr Pooter, his wife Carrie, and son Lupin would

have felt entirely at home during the Walworth Primrose concert. The evening's political element – the speech by the habitation's chairman – was consigned to the interval. It was unlikely to have had added much to the enthusiasm generated by Miss Daisy Pitt, Mr Prince and the others which would have sent the audience home with renewed ardour for the Primrose cause. Brevity was sensibly commended to all Primrose political orators: official guidance stressed that they 'must indeed be below the mean if they cannot say all they *need* say in from ten to fifteen minutes'.[195] It was rather more important that time should be found for anyone able to 'sing patriotic songs with good choruses so that the audience may join in'.[196] The great ones of the League looked on with satisfaction, if not exactly with a sense of ecstatic approval. 'Vulgar?' said Salisbury's wife in response to the obvious criticism. 'Of course it is vulgar. But that is why we have got on so well'.[197]

So the seasons of the year, which could be marked off in the League's own calendar (of which over 21,000 copies were sold in 1909), passed in a ceaseless round of concerts, dances, teas, sports, picnics and fetes. 'In halls lavishly decorated with flowers, ferns, banners, flags and mottoes, dancing was invariably "kept up with vigour" until two, three or four in the morning'.[198] Through the League the fabled delights of the music hall, well-established in the large cities, were brought to more remote towns and villages. 'A rich profusion of punchinellos, pierrots, jugglers and ventriloquists vied for favour on habitation programmes with oriental illusions, equilibrisms, wax works, conjuring tricks, marionettes, and exhibitions of microscopic objects or of Egyptian antiquities'.[199] It was a new, raucous era of popular politics which left the old order behind. At the Torquay habitation 'a solid county politician sat in complacent dignity at the end of the platform, bowing graciously at the gusts of applause from the audience, whose gaze was riveted on a greased pole set up directly behind the platform and the politician'.[200]

The stimulating Primrose pleasures were far from being entirely frivolous. The leaders of the League found the perfect way of combining the entertainment that the members demanded with the edification they were felt to require (at least to some extent). Habitations were instructed to make ample provision in their extensive programmes of activities for limelight and magic lantern displays. These were among the most exciting of the new technologies at the end of the

nineteenth century. 'Lectures with slides thrown on a screen were the mainstay of habitation entertainment … On the retina … the magic lantern stamped scenes of the flag flying at some outpost of Empire, of the fleet in battle formation at Spithead, of the death of Nelson on the deck of the Victory, or of the Queen enthroned as Empress of India'.[201] One of the most popular series, consisting of fifteen slides on the union with Ireland, began with John Bull offering his hand to a downcast Erin (who shyly takes it) and ended with Disraeli encircled by a huge wreath of primroses. In 1900 habitations settled down to an array of imperial and national themes in up to 90 slides including 'the Transvaal War' and 'the stately homes of England'. The League's central office in London maintained a separate lantern department from which consignments of slides were dispatched across the country, fortifying the League's intense patriotism. After over twenty years' experience in the business, Grand Council concluded in 1911 that 'there are few better methods for instructing the people in the subjects of the day than lectures illustrated with the aid of a limelight lantern'.[202]

The Liberals and the hated socialists looked on enviously – and helplessly. They had nothing comparable. Nor could they match the League's success in enlisting young people and children. Like so much else in the League the initiative came from zealous members themselves:

> In the nineties Croydon reported a membership of six hundred "buds", as juvenile members were called. At the request of the warden of the juvenile branch at Croydon, Grand Council drew up an explanatory leaflet for the juvenile branches all over the country. Papers on Primrose League subjects were submitted by juvenile members in competitions; prizes were given for letters written in foreign languages, and special Primrose badges and pins were issued for children. Lectures on patriotism were delivered at various juvenile branches and special leaflets were written for children on the issues of the day.[203]

Children from seven upwards enlisted in the ranks of the 'Primrose Buds' with their parents' consent and donned their own badges and pins with pride. Kindly

Primrose dames oversaw their activities, ensuring they were properly instructed in the principles of the League and in the patriotic values which it represented. Competitions and examinations helped prepare them for a lifetime of Tory service. The 'Buds' were asked to answer such questions as 'In what year was the last Irish Parliament held? Why was it dissolved and who was the Prime Minister?', 'Name a few important events that occurred during the Earl of Beaconsfield's life, and give a short description of the Berlin Treaty', 'Why should we honour King Edward VII?' and 'What was the origin of the Primrose League? Give three good reasons for belonging to it'. High marks must surely have been given to the eight-year-old in 1898 who in answer to the question 'What are your reasons for wanting to join the Primrose League?' wrote: 'My father and mother are both members, and I go with them to the meetings, which are very nice, and I like the entertainments; when I grow old enough I shall join the League because I want to learn about the Queen and the things they talk about at the meetings'.[204] (The national curriculum today does not do so well as the League in getting the very young to express themselves with such clarity and to use the semi-colon.) By the First World War there were 259 juvenile branches with 65,000 'Buds' who would later flower as Tory activists in the age of Stanley Baldwin (himself a product of the League). Not all were the beautifully behaved little angels depicted in Primrose propaganda. A party of thirty from Daventry in Northamptonshire who came for a slap-up tea with that most devoted of Primrose dames, Lady Knightley, were found to be 'ill-mannered little toads'.[205]

Amongst the young, like the grown-ups, the League's uncomplicated patriotism was the secret of success. Malmesbury in Wiltshire provided a typical example in February 1909:

> The Juvenile Branch attached to the Habitation was only founded in December last, and now numbers 384. A remarkable demonstration was organised on Saturday, and a procession of the children was arranged through the town of Malmesbury, each child carrying a Union Jack. Afterwards a number of working class people in the town enrolled their children as members of the League.[206]

As they strode out on such occasions, they often sang 'the Hymn of the Primrose Buds':

Children of the Empire,
Primrose Buds are we,
Marching, ever marching,
On to victory,
Wearing still the emblem,
Just a tiny flower,
From our native woodland,
Every joyful hour.

We a pledge have taken,
Ever to be true,
To our King and Country,
And the Empire too –
True to our religion,
Ever serving Him,
Who is loved by angels,
And the Seraphim.

They and their families could, if they wished, live almost their entire lives under the Primrose banners. The League was a shop through which a wide range of goods could be acquired either directly or indirectly: Primrose soap, tea, dish cloths, coal, stationery, register books, calendars, diaries, tea tables and parasols, along with 'Beaconsfield skirts and carriage wraps'. It was also a mini-welfare state. The Primrose League Benefit Society enabled 'members (men and women) of the Primrose League to make substantial provision against sickness, age and death'. A contribution of a penny a day (two pence for the over-forties) brought a sickness payment of ten shillings a week (half the average wage) and an 'annuity after 65'.[207] The National Conservative Industrial Dwellings Association launched in 1885 with vigorous support from the League built houses which working men could acquire on easy terms.

Over and over again the League spelt out its message of social unity, which Stanley Baldwin would later consciously turn into 'one nation' politics. 'A happy characteristic of the Primrose League is found in the bond of union and sympathy it establishes in the various classes of the community, and [to that end] it is desirable to encourage the holding of social gatherings'.[208] The Walworth concert and Torquay greasy pole were in their small ways manifestations of the creed. But it was displayed most vividly at the great Primrose fete, the culminating event in almost every habitation's annual calendar. There the members of the League gained the greatest diversions and pleasures to reward them for the long hours they spent canvassing and recruiting for the Tory cause. They descended in droves on the stately homes of England conscious of the great privilege of entering domains that had hitherto been entirely closed to large crowds. For some there was the added excitement of an unusual railway journey. 'In the 1890s the Melbury Habitation in the depths of west Dorset drew attendances of 5,000 to the grounds of the Earl and Countess of Ilchester, largely by means of special trains which converged from Weymouth, Bridport, Yeovil and Abbotsbury'.[209] On arrival in the aristocratic parks the guests, adorned with their Primrose badges and stars, mixed with the cream of local society on terms which today seem distinctly unappealing, particularly when described in the cloying language of the *Primrose League Gazette:*

> In these happy open-air festivals, provided with so much tact and energy by the Primrose League, all classes mingle. The lower middle class of the country towns is attracted by that social ambition which actuates every class to cooperate with the smaller and greater gentry. The rank, the beauty, the kindness of the ladies are enlisted to brighten the brutal and the monotonous lives of the country poor.[210]

In 2010 deferential behaviour is derided, but in the great days of the League before 1914 it occurred naturally and inevitably when the classes met socially – a habit from which the Tories gained mightily over the years until modernising social change put paid to it. The vast gathering, at which the 'classes were brought together' at the 1898 Fawsley Primrose fete in Northamptonshire, was almost certainly as happy as the *Gazette,* with its love of deference and sycophancy, claimed:

> The attendance was numbered by thousands, the large majority intelligent toilers; and the dainty primrose – emblem of a vast and influential organisation – shone conspicuously on almost all present. Nor were Primrose League decorations – prized as honourable recognitions of honest and conscientious service – scarce, or confined to one class: and the pride with which they were worn and treasured is a sufficient answer to the paltry Radical gibe regarding their work. Everyone was happy, the classes were brought together under the happiest auspices, and the good feeling prevailing was as striking as it was characteristic of Primroseism … In one part of the field a programme of sports, with items amusing as well as athletic, commanded the attention of a large number; those interested in [the] practical adaptation of a new invention rode about on motor cars supplied Messrs. Sleath, Leamington; others patronised roundabouts, swings, shooting galleries, and etc.; while still others roamed enchanted through the beautiful grounds so kindly lent by Lady Knightley of Fawsley; or enjoyed the pleasures of social chat. There was also a large audience to hear two clever comediettas … and to see Professor Herman's (Leamington) clever conjuring performance; while a reading, given by Lady Knightley of Fawsley, was not less appreciated. Another source of amusement largely indulged in was dancing, to the strains of the Daventry Band.[211]

It would hardly have been reasonable to ask for anything more. But the Fawsley throng was deprived of an additional treat which the Primrose dames often provided. 'Imposing parades of bicyclists in massed formation, or intricate and elaborate bicycle drills, frequently opened League fetes'.[212] The skills of the Primrose Bicycling Corps were not limited to searching out voters in rural areas.

The League's 'vulgar' social scene, capped by its famous fetes, was crucial to its extraordinary political success. It is tempting to suppose that no occasion

was more enjoyable than the fete held on 26 July 1897 at Claverton Manor (now the American Museum), near Bath. It marked Winston Churchill's debut on the political platform. The League, created by his father, was naturally the first political organisation that he joined: he became a member as a schoolboy in Brighton at the age of twelve in 1887, less than four years after its start, making him in effect one of the first of the Primrose 'Buds'. He wrote to his mother on 24 May 1887: 'About a dozen of the boys have joined the Primrose League since yesterday. I am among the number & intend to join the one down here and also the one which you have in London. Would you send me a nice badge as well as a paper of Diploma, for I want to belong to yours most tremendously'.[213] (One senses in this letter the desperation with which he sought his neglectful, pleasure-seeking parents' affection, a matter on which his biographers have so frequently commented.) From an early age the family connection meant that the League mattered a great deal to him. The fact that he delivered his first political speech at a Primrose gathering ten years later did much to ensure that the League would retain a special place in his heart for ever.

The *Morning Post* sent down a special reporter so the Claverton fete received wide coverage. Churchill himself later described the occasion: 'There were coconut-shies and races and catchpenny shows of every kind'. At five o'clock in the afternoon a bell was rung summoning the revellers to a tent where Churchill spoke from a platform 'which consisted of about four boards laid across some small barrels. There was neither table nor chair; but as soon as about a hundred persons had rather reluctantly, I thought, quitted their childish amusements in the park, the Chairman rose and in a brief speech introduced me … The audience, which gradually increased in numbers, seemed delighted … At the end they clapped loudly for quite a long time. So I could do it after all!' The Primrose oration laid to rest his long-standing doubts about his ability to speak effectively in public because of his speech impediment.

Churchill also recalled: 'I was particularly pleased with one sentence which I coined, to the effect that "England would gain far more from the rising tide of Tory Democracy than from the dried-up drainpipe of Radicalism" '. (Tory democracy, his father's trademark phrase, now became his own, remaining just as vague and

ill-defined as in Lord Randolph's day*.) He added: 'I had asked how long I ought to speak, and being told that about a quarter of an hour would do, I confined myself rigorously to twenty-five minutes'.[214] The speech concluded with a rousing tribute to the League for 'driving the principles of the Tory party into the heads of the people of this country, and, though the task has been heavy and the labour long, they have had in the end a glorious reward'.[215] The Churchillian cadences, with which the world would become so familiar, were first heard by the Primrose League. As for the orator, he recalled later that 'I began to be much pleased with myself and with the world'.[216]

Not the least of the services performed by the largest political organisation in Britain was its role in helping to nurture the greatest of British statesmen. He in turn cherished it as a precious link to, and reminder of, his father. In 1896, the year before his Primrose speech, he had joined the Randolph Churchill Habitation in Paddington**. His defection to the Liberals over the issue of tariff reform in 1904 naturally strained, but may not have destroyed, the warm association. There seems to be no record of it being sundered completely, though his mother was forced out of the Ladies' Grand Council after an acrimonious exchange of letters with Arthur Balfour's niece, Alice.[217] A blind eye may well have been turned on the transgressions of the founder's son, great though they were. At all events the unfortunate interlude was swiftly forgotten when Churchill rejoined the Conservative Party in 1924. On more than one occasion in the late 1920s when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer (his father's old post) he brought back to Grand Habitation meetings in the Albert Hall the rousing oratory to which the League had been so accustomed in its early years. He paid his annual subscription of one guinea as a knight imperial of the League with unfailing regularity in the late 1930s

* A shrewd journalist, G.W. Steevens, noted the following year: 'At present he calls himself a Tory Democrat. Tory, the opinions might change; democrat, the methods, never. For he has the twentieth century in his marrow' (quoted in Martin Gilbert, *In Search of Churchill,* HarperCollins paperback edition, 1995, p.216).

** The Secretary of the Randolph Churchill Habitation, A. Fitzgerald Powell, wrote to him on 14 July 1896: 'You have been unanimously elected as a member of this Habitation. I may mention that your election has given great pleasure and satisfaction to all the members of this Habitation, who trust that at no distant date you may be enabled to be present at some their functions' (Churchill Papers, CHAR 1/15/5, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge). Six years earlier he had formally become a Primrose knight on joining the Wimborne Habitation in Grosvenor Square, London. 'I am proud to have added such an illustrious name', the Secretary, J.W. Spedding, told him on 10 July 1890 in a letter accompanying his diploma (Churchill Papers, CHAR 1/1/6).

during his campaign against appeasement which made him the most controversial politician in Britain.[218] The League's years of decline were softened by its return to the Churchillian fold where it had started in 1883.

114 Quoted in Robb, *The Primrose League*, p. 9.
115 Ibid.
116 The League's detailed enrolment figures from 1884 to 1910 are printed in Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People 1880-1935* (Basil Blackwell, 1985), p.27.
117 Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (Phoenix paperback edition, 2000), p.276.
118 'A Short History of the Formation of the Primrose League corrected and revised by the Founders', Primrose League Papers MS. I, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
119 *Primrose League Gazette*, 10 June 1893 quoted in Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, p.141.
120 Ibid., p.142 quoting the *Primrose League Gazette*, 1 September 1898.
121 Algernon Borthwick, 'The Primrose League', *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. XX, July 1886, p.36.
122 'A Short History of the Formation of the Primrose League', Primrose League Papers.
123 Borthwick, 'The Primrose League', *Fortnightly Review*, July 1886, p.35.
124 'A Short History of the Formation of the Primrose League', Primrose League Papers.
125 Borthwick, 'The Primrose League', *Fortnightly Review*, July 1886, p.35.
126 Robb, *The Primrose League*, p.61.
127 Ibid., p.10.
128 Quoted in Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury*, p.109.
129 Lady Knightley's Journal, 6 April 1887 (Gordon (ed.), *The Journals of Lady Knightley*, p.112).
130 See Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, Chapter 5.
131 Ibid., pp 101, 102.
132 Ibid., p.144.
133 Ibid.
134 Duke of Portland, *Men Women and Things* (Faber, 1937), p.175.
135 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, p.108.
136 Ibid., p.103.
137 Ibid., p.99.
138 Ibid., pp 127-8.
139 Ibid., p.123.
140 Ibid., p.130.
141 Ibid., p.94.
142 Quoted in Robb, *The Primrose League*, p.40.

143 Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party*, p.195.
144 Quoted in H.J. Hanham, *The Nineteenth Century Constitution: Documents and Commentary* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.291.
145 Ibid., p.292.
146 Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury*, p.105.
147 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, pp 9, 16.
148 Smith to Salisbury, 14 August 1883, Salisbury Papers, quoted in Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party*, p.159.
149 Churchill to Salisbury, 22 December 1883, Salisbury Papers, quoted in R.R. James, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, p.127.
150 Primrose League Papers, MS. I, f.92.
151 Ibid.
152 Borthwick, 'The Primrose League', *Fortnightly Review*, July 1886, p.37.
153 Primrose League Papers, MS. I, f.92.
154 Borthwick, 'The Primrose League', *Fortnightly Review*, July 1886, p.37.
155 Ibid.,p.35.
156 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, p.56.
157 For further discussion of this point, see my *Tory Heroine: Dorothy Brant and the Rise of the Conservative Women* (Sumfield & Day, 2008), p.6.
158 Grand Council Minutes, 24 June 1909, Primrose League Papers, MS. 5/1, f.130.
159 Primrose League Papers, MS. 10, f.107.
160 *Primrose League Gazette,* 6 May 1909, enclosed in Grand Council Minutes, Primrose League Papers, MS. 5/1,f.107.
161 Grand Council Minutes,18 February 1909, Primrose League Papers, MS. 5/1, f.73.
162 Pugh, *The Tories and the People,* p.16.
163 Grand Council Minutes, 1 March 1884, Primrose League Papers, MS.1, f.6.
164 Minutes, 9 September 1885, ibid., f.53.
165 Letters from Grand Council to Salisbury and Northcote (then Lord Iddesleigh), January 1886, ibid., f.140.
166 Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury,* p.79.
167 Grand Council Minutes, 18 October 1900, Primrose League Papers, MS. 3, f.36.
168 *Primrose League Gazette,* 6 May 1909, enclosed with Grand Council Minutes, Primrose League Papers, MS. 5/1, f.107.
169 Algernon Borthwick, 'The Primrose League', *Fortnightly Review,* July 1886, pp. 36-7.
170 Robb, *The Primrose League,* p.49.
171 Ibid.,p.50.
172 Ibid.
173 Grand Council Minutes, 4 March 1909, Primrose League Papers, MS. 5/1, f.77.
174 Robb, *The Primrose League,* pp 65-6.
175 Lady Knightley's Journal, 21 April 1891, printed in Gordon (ed.), *Politics and Society: The Journals of Lady Knightley,* p.173.

176 Lady Knightley's Journal, 21 April 1899, ibid., p.304.
177 Robb, *The Primrose League,* p.66.
178 *Primrose League Gazette,* 6 May 1909.
179 Lady Gwendolen Cecil, *Biographical Studies of … Robert Third Marquis of Salisbury*, p.73.
180 Salisbury to Lady John Manners, 26 April 1886, Salisbury Papers (copy kindly supplied by Mr Robin Harcourt Williams, Librarian and Archivist at Hatfield House).
181 Salisbury to Lady John Manners, 9 March 1884, Salisbury Papers (for which I am also indebted to Mr Harcourt Williams).
182 John Vincent (ed.), *The Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby (1826-93) between 1878 and 1893* (Leopard's Head Press, 2003), p.861.
183 Salisbury to Jennie Churchill, 28 November 1890, Churchill Papers, CHAR 28/101/128.
184 Pugh, *The Tories and the People,* p.91.
185 Primrose League Papers, MS. I, f.10.
186 Ibid., f.128.
187 Primrose League Papers, MS. 14, f.89.
188 Grand Council Minutes,13 December 1900, Primrose League Papers, MS. 3, f.66.
189 General Purposes Committee Minutes, 7 July 1910, Primrose League Papers, MS. 5/ 1, f.247.
190 Report of the Executive Committee of the Ladies' Grand Council, May 1891, Primrose League Papers, MS.12.
191 Robb, *The Primrose League,* p.105.
192 Grand Council Minutes, 7 October 1909, Primrose League Papers, MS. 5/ 1, f.155.
193 *Primrose League Gazette,* February 1900.
194 Quoted in Pugh, *The Tories and the People,* p.29.
195 Ibid., p.35.
196 Ibid.. p.29.
197 Mrs Cornwallis -West, *Reminiscences of Lady Randolph Churchill,* p.100.
198 Pugh, *The Tories and the People,* p.30.
199 Robb, *The Primrose League,* p.89.
200 Ibid., p.87.
201 Ibid., pp 92-3.
202 Grand Council annual report for 1911, Primrose League Papers, MS. 5/1, f.353. The previous year the Council had decided that 'Mr Broadway be appointed to look after the Lantern Department, and to lecture when required at a salary of £100 per annum, with one month's notice, his duties also to consist of keeping various lectures up to date, and generally to look after the slides' (ibid. f.208).
203 Robb, *The Primrose League,* pp 53-4.
204 Pugh, *The Tories and the People,* p.214.
205 Gordon (ed.), *Politics and Society: The Journals of Lady Knightley:* p.14.
206 Grand Council Minutes, 4 February 1909, Primrose League Papers, MS. 5/1, f.65.
207 Primrose League Papers, MS. 14, f.50.

208 Primrose League Papers, MS. 10, f.101.
209 Pugh, *The Tories and the People,* p.32.
210 *Primrose League Gazette,* 1 July 1896.
211 Ibid., 1 September 1898.
212 Robb, *The Primrose League,* p.121.
213 Winston Churchill to his mother, 24 May 1887, Churchill Papers, CHAR 28/14/14.
214 Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Life* (Odhams Press new edition, 1947), pp 202-3.
215 Randolph S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill: Vol. I Youth 1874-1900* (Heineman, 1966), p.345.
216 Churchill, *My Early Life,* p.204.
217 Churchill Papers, CHAR 28/51/14-18. The former Jennie Churchill, now Mrs Cornwallis-West, insisted 'I am a Unionist Free Trader and not a Radical' and challenged Alice Balfour's claim that membership of the League is 'only open to members of the Conservative Party'. Strictly speaking she was right, but in practice the League was always totally committed to the Tories.
218 The receipts are in the Churchill Papers (CHAR 1/296/28, 1/315/69-70, 1/339/194-5).

V. CHURCHILLIAN TWILIGHT

It was a long, long twilight. The years of Primrose glory ended abruptly after the First World War when the political world changed dramatically. The right to vote was now at last extended to the entire adult population. The pre-war electorate of under 8 million tripled in 1918 and rose to almost 29 million ten years later with the enfranchisement of all women over the age of 21 on the same terms as men. (It is always salutary to reflect that the country which conferred universal suffrage on large parts of the world as it abandoned its empire only became a full democracy itself just over eighty years ago.) In the new, very different circumstances the Conservative Party leadership swiftly came to the conclusion that its interests would no longer be well served by contracting out responsibility for so much vital electoral activity to a separate organisation, experienced and unfailingly loyal though it was.

A mass Party organisation superseded the great mass voluntary movement that had succoured the Conservative leadership so faithfully for so long. During the 1920s many constituency associations introduced a standard, mandatory subscription of one shilling (5p) which competed successfully with the traditionally low charges of Primrose habitations. By adopting the practice of the League, the Party secured much of its membership. The Primrose dames were widely regarded as the most valuable recruits: the driving forces in so many habitations now became the tirelessly energetic organisers of association activities and money-raising functions. They taught the associations how to run the grand fetes and other jolly social occasions through which the League had brightened

the lives of ordinary Tories. The leadership gave them every encouragement. 'By April 1918 it had decided that, as a general principle, women ought to enjoy a third of the places in the Party's representative bodies both at the centre and in the constituencies … the movement of women activists [from the League] was the key factor in stimulating membership, organisation and financial improvement in post-war Conservatism,'[219] though there was deep disappointment in high places at the refusal of so many constituencies to reward them by adopting them as parliamentary candidates – a severe setback for the cause of Conservative modernisation which I have discussed elsewhere.[220]

By making itself really attractive for the first time to staunch rank and file Tory supporters, the Party reduced the League within a matter of years to a position of modest importance in organisational terms. Its famous magic lanterns could not compete with the professionally made propaganda films produced by Central Office and sent on tour round the constituencies in the inter-war years. The whole range of Primrose entertainments which had once attracted so much praise was cruelly dismissed by one habitation secretary as 'disorganised charity'.[221] The pre-war League had laid on special trains to transport its excited members to its fetes. The Party in the late 1920s chartered a White Star liner to send 'some eight hundred enthusiastic Conservative workers' on a Mediterranean cruise 'bringing together all classes … The holiday spirit prevailed throughout'[222], though all MPs bar one boycotted the expedition, unattracted by the company of their staunchest supporters. Even the finest Primrose fete must have seemed exceedingly tame by comparison.

There was a tendency, particularly marked among unsentimental senior Conservatives looking to their own futures, to see the League as a rather unnecessary sunset home for survivors from the past, unable to help strengthen the constituency associations by moving into them. Sir Cuthbert Headlam, a junior minister in MacDonald's National Government, was scathing about it in his private record of a conversation with one of the League's high officials, Sir Reginald Bennett, in 1933:

> He assures me that the P.L. performs an admirable function in politics by keeping the elderly women amused and

> interested – which probably is perfectly true – he says that if the League were to expire all these dames would retire from the contest – perhaps they would – but would it much weaken us if they did?[223]

There is little indication that those MPs who held office in the inter-war League did much more than speak at the occasional meeting. In January 1935 the rich, flighty socialite, 'Chips' Channon, drove down to his Southend constituency 'to address the Primrose League, of which I am the Ruling Councillor'[224] – a position which in the old days would have involved close supervision of a small army of Primrose canvassers. Many Conservative associations, eclipsed for so long by the League, were unwilling to treat it with fraternal goodwill. In 1935 the League's Grand Council could report no progress at all in its endeavours to 'bring about closer contact with local Conservative associations … no effort has been spared to secure the end in view'.[225] The League's agent for the west of England encountered a wall of hostility: 'she states that it is [because of] the opposition from Conservative associations which is so strong that she has been unable to form new branches of the League'.[226] The new modernised Party organisation had turned against its predecessor.

There was decline, but no fall. The League did not succumb to melancholy or despair, though it agonised over its steadily falling income. Like many other institutions past their finest hours, it was sustained by the loyalty of families brought up in its service and by well-established traditions, fortified in the League's case by its extensive private honours system. It duly emphasised its unique selling point: 'The Primrose League is the only Conservative organisation in which father, mother and children can be members. It is an organisation for the family'.[227] Family devotion to the League might sometimes be so intense that even boys were given Primrose amongst their first names.

Cuthbert Headlam was unfair as well as unkind in dismissing it as a place where ageing dames saw out their final years. Throughout the inter-war period the League dedicated itself to cultivating as many Primrose 'Buds' as it could find. An annual sports festival was organised for them at the Crystal Palace. There was also in the

1930s an annual swimming gala at the St George's Baths in Buckingham Palace Road. As Hitler stoked international tension, physical fitness became something of an obsession among Conservative policy-makers concerned about the country's inability to match German bodily splendour.[228] On 1 July 1939 the first Junior Primrose League physical training rally took place in Hyde Park. It included a march-past of 400 'Buds'. 'A high standard of physical fitness and efficiency was displayed'.[229]

Other well-intentioned initiatives made limited progress. They included, at the suggestion of Stanley Baldwin's wife, 'a course of etiquette for the large class of girls who do not understand the niceties attached to attendance at receptions, social and other gatherings … The Primrose League might exercise a salutary influence among these young voters by undertaking a department with this object.'[230] An organisation that once specialised in canvassing was now reduced to giving instruction in curtseying. It had no idea how many members remained. 'The results of the Primrose League census for 1937 had provided insufficient data for an accurate return of membership'.[231]

There were, however, some substantial consolations. The League's activities might be more marginal, but its high ideals, reinterpreted to suit contemporary Conservatism, achieved a new importance and relevance. They inspired the dominant figure in inter-war politics, Stanley Baldwin, who was Grand Master of the League (1925-38) during practically the whole of his period as Tory leader (1923-37). He constantly reiterated how much he owed to the League from which he had received his political education and training as a young man.[232] 'My association with the Primrose League', he wrote in 1938, 'dates from its earliest years when I was Ruling Councillor of a Habitation. I entered politics under its banner, realising that it existed to promote principles that were essential to good government.'[233] He meant social unity above all. It was Baldwin who put 'one nation' at the centre of Conservative politics: indeed he was the first to use the term in a speech in December 1924.[234]

By drawing together members of all classes the League had provided the young Baldwin with a practical demonstration of 'one nation': he made it the guiding

principle of his leadership during which modern Conservatism was shaped. 'The spirit of this age', Baldwin said at the League's Grand Habitation meeting on 2 May 1924, 'is a spirit restless and dissatisfied'. The Primrose tradition could supply salvation through 'that brotherhood which Conservatives and Unionists have among themselves and feel towards every class'.[235] The League naturally took great pride in its association with Baldwin 'who, by his public work and inspiring addresses, had brought the fundamental principles of the Primrose League into modern politics and had applied them in the solution of the national and imperial problems of our time'.[236]

Baldwin cast a long and powerful shadow during the League's prolonged Churchillian twilight. When later in the 1950s the League was challenged by Lord Woolton, perhaps the greatest of all Conservative Party Chairmen, who 'could not quite see the role of the Primrose League', he was told that it should be regarded 'as supplying the principles of the Conservative Party'.[237] And those principles, it insisted, underpinned a 'democratic and progressive Conservatism [as] the best guarantee of the future greatness and prosperity of our Empire'.[238] That is what Winston Churchill in particular liked to hear.

Churchill could not match the record of youthful, practical service to the League that Baldwin possessed. His glittering military career in early life, often reported by himself in the newspapers, left him with no time to canvass for the Primrose habitations in London to which he belonged: nor is it likely that he felt the slightest inclination to engage in such activity. From the first the League meant a great deal to him because he identified it with the father whom he worshipped and with the cause of Tory democracy which Lord Randolph had in vague terms proclaimed: as a result his attachment to the League was always strong and intense. As Grand Master which he was 'honoured to accept'[239] in 1943 and remained until his death in 1965, he returned again and again to the deep feelings which the League always evoked in his mind. Speaking at its annual conference, the Grand Habitation meeting, on 18 April 1947, he declared:

> I am proud of the fact that my father's League number is No. 1. When he, with a group of friends, founded the League

> in 1883, it was intended to cherish the memory and revive the inspiration of Lord Beaconsfield, who knew so well how to maintain the honour and interests of our country abroad and at the same time open new paths in social advance at home. He it was who gave in 1875 the British Trade Union movement the Charter which made it so often a responsible and stabilising force in British industry. He it was whose policy in 1876 placed upon the brow of Queen Victoria the Imperial Crown of India – now being so shamefully cast away. When the League was founded, it was intended by my father to be the vanguard of Tory democracy, and that is what we are determined to make it today. The association of the greatness of Britain with the ceaseless advance in the comfort, happiness and security of the British people must still remain our guide, and Disraeli's motto 'Empire and Freedom', which is our watchword, is as true today as when it was spoken 70 years ago.[240]

Here Churchill speaks from the heart, drawing very selectively and partially (just as his father had done) on Disraeli's record to enunciate a moving and compelling Tory faith which inspired him and to which he so often returned in his speeches to inspire others. Baldwin twenty years earlier had summoned up the spirit of Disraeli to serve his purposes. Baldwin proclaimed 'one nation' Conservatism; Churchill constantly reiterated his father's Tory democracy.[241] Both meant much the same thing, except that Tory democracy contained a powerful streak of imperialism to which Winston Churchill was so strongly drawn (his father much less so). Both were meant to be seen as general, high-minded ideals compatible with very different Tory political programmes which changing circumstances would determine. Both reflected the values of the Primrose League.

Baldwin and Churchill are today hardly ever mentioned in the same breath because of their sharp differences over foreign policy in 1930s, but in domestic politics they had much in common, thanks to their common Primrose heritage. Unsurprisingly, however, the League made their founder's son the chief focus

of their loyalty and devotion. It was to him that it looked above all during its long twilight years. One of its leading figures, Lord Chesham, writing in 1958 to express thanks for 'an inspiring message', assured him that the League would always 'uphold those principles, given us by Disraeli, which your father sought to perpetuate, and which you have so faithfully served'.[242]

Churchill fondly imagined that over these years the League was growing larger, not smaller. That at any rate was what he told his father's ghost in November 1947. While he was in his Chartwell studio one day copying a painting of his father, 'I turned round with my palette in my hand, and there, sitting in my red leather upright armchair, was my father'. The ghost asked first 'Does the Monarchy go on?' After being assured that it was 'stronger than in the days of Queen Victoria', the questions moved to Lord Randolph's main political and social interests.

> 'Does the Carlton Club go on?'
> 'Yes, they are going to rebuild it'.*
> 'I thought it would have lasted longer; the structure seemed quite solid.'
> 'What about the Turf Club?'
> 'It's OK.'
> 'How do you mean, OK?'
> 'It's an American expression, Papa … '
> 'And the Primrose League?'
> 'They have never had more members'.
> He seemed to be pleased at this.
> 'I always believed in Dizzy, that old Jew. He saw into the future. He had to bring the British working man into the centre of the picture'.[243] **

* In 1947 the Carlton planned to rebuild its bombed building in Pall Mall and return to it from 69 St James's Street. I included an account of these ultimately abortive plans in *The Carlton Club 1832-2007* (2007), pp 174-9.

** The remarkable conversation is printed in full in Martin Gilbert, *'Never Despair': Winston S. Churchill 1945-1965* (Heineman, 1988), pp 364-72. Throughout the father assumes that his son's life has been a failure. At the end of the conversation Lord Randolph says, 'Of course you are too old now to think about such things, but when I hear you talk I really wonder you didn't go into politics. You might have done a lot to help. You might even have made a name for yourself'.

Churchill went on referring flatteringly to the growth of the League in the speeches he delivered annually at the Albert Hall as Grand Master until declining powers brought them to an end in 1957 (when he ticked off the United Nations for opposing Anthony Eden's 'resolute action' over Suez the previous year.[244]) 'The Primrose League', he said in 1956, 'has endured the battle of life for seventy-three years and is now stronger and more active than ever. I am greatly complimented to be its Grand Master … and I was very glad when you consented to my continuing to hold office after my resignation as Prime Minister a year ago'.[245]

Churchill's unfailingly optimistic words masked accelerating decline. Fewer than 90 habitations remained out of the 2,300 that had flourished in the League's heyday and many of these existed only on paper. Grand Council minuted in February 1955 that all habitations had been asked 'in the most forceful terms to send in their annual report completed as fully as possible, but so far only half these forms [43 in total] had been returned, and very few have answered all the questions'.[246] The Council concluded that 'the League as a whole was at a low level … The officers felt that there was no entirely fresh activity in which the League could profitably play a part'.[247]

Its communications created no excitement. When, after being kept waiting for so long, Anthony Eden finally succeeded Churchill as Prime Minister in April 1955, he eagerly opened his 'new red box' for the first time, but his heart sank when he found nothing in it apart from 'two papers at the bottom, one about a plaque for Queen Mary and the other about the Primrose League'.[248] It did its best, however, to go on encouraging the young whom Disraeli had dubbed the 'trustees of posterity'. In December 1962 Gatwick was the scene of a lively dance. 'A special Primrose League train down to Gatwick and back had been arranged which, according to all the young members, proved very good fun'.[249]

Elsewhere the Primrose shadows lengthened. After an 'embarrassingly sparse'[250] turnout of 2,000 at the Albert Hall, the annual conference was moved in 1960 to Central Hall, Westminster where Margaret Thatcher addressed it sixteen years later: the shrinking League did its best to give her 'a great welcome and show our support'.[251] She recalled Churchill's firmness during the Cold War. 'Almost

exactly 13 years ago to this day (3 May 1963) Sir Winston Churchill gave you a Grand Master's message devoted to the subject of defence…events in the world today compel me to return to Sir Winston's subject: the defence of Britain and of our society as we know it'.[252] Unsurprisingly, she took the opportunity which the Primrose League speech gave her to link herself to 'Winston'— something she always liked to do. By the late 1960s the organisation was running at a loss of some £2,000 a year. Cherished heirlooms had to be put up for sale to raise much needed cash, but sometimes produced only embarrassment. When a diamond pendant 'which belonged to Mrs Disraeli' was taken to Christie's in 1972, it was found that 'unfortunately the rubies were not real but glass'.[253] In 1973 the League's London office went: rather cramped quarters were then provided for five years by the Carlton where the League had first been formed on a small scale ninety years earlier. The wheel had come full circle.

One woman of indomitable spirit rallied the League during its twilight years. As resources shrank, Evelyn Killby (1920-89), the League's devoted secretary, took on more and more responsibility until the entire administration rested with her. She encouraged the few remaining branches (as habitations were now known). From time to time fresh life suddenly burst forth in unexpected places involving unexpected people. In November 1976 Lord Montagu of Beaulieu 'expressed the wish to join the Primrose League and [said] he hoped to start a new branch in the New Forest'.[254] West Sussex enlisted in the declining Primrose ranks two years later. In London a number of backbench Tory MPs including Geoffrey Johnson Smith and Bernard Weatherill helped keep the League alive. Outside Parliament a young Bill Cash, convinced of the perennial significance of the League's ideals and values, organised a thriving discussion group. He also redrafted the principles of the League for the first time since 1884, giving greater emphasis to Disraeli's injunction 'to elevate the condition of the people'. In the late 1970s a small group were still keeping up one of the most venerable traditions: an annual pilgrimage to Hughenden to mark Primrose Day, though the great statue in Parliament Square had ceased to be decorated.

The formal records of the League end in December 1977 with news of a good attendance at a recent lunch addressed by Geoffrey Howe and the discussion of

plans for Michael Heseltine to speak at Grand Habitation in Caxton Hall the following year. Not much life was visible in the 1980s and efforts by a former senior Conservative Party official, Roger Boaden, to stimulate fresh growth came to nothing. Fitful activity was maintained by a handful of surviving branches: one or two may still be in existence today. The formal obsequies, however, took place in December 2004. Lord Mowbray, who had long been at the centre of the League's affairs, told the press that 'in recent years, our meetings have become smaller and smaller. It had become more of a dining club and was no longer serving usefully the political purpose for which it was founded'.[255] Despite its post-war financial privations £70,000 remained in the Primrose coffers: it was presented to a grateful Tory Party. Four years later two great emblems – the Grand Master's badge which had been in Winston Churchill's possession for 22 years and a diamond jewel which had adorned the League's senior dame – were presented to the Carlton where they are now on permanent display, along with two resplendent banners from Ryde in the Isle of Wight donated to the Club more recently.

The Carlton's fine memorials testify to the importance of the Primrose story which began at the Club, then in Pall Mall, 127 years ago. Lord Randolph Churchill's gift to the Tories provided the Party with an election-winning army of voluntary activists before the First World War when its own organisation was unequal to the task. It brought women into the mainstream of politics for the first time. It was the first organisation to make provision for children. The League developed the social side of Tory politics before the Party itself realised its significance. It turned Disraeli into the greatest of all Tory icons, who obligingly bestowed posthumous blessings on the progressive Conservatism of the twentieth century – the Conservatism which Winston Churchill carried forward under the Primrose banners of his adored father's creation, invoking his father's famous phrase 'Tory democracy' during the League's long Churchillian twilight years as a reminder of greater times in the past.

The League transformed the entire character of the Conservative Party. With a working-class majority among its membership, it invented modern popular politics in Britain. It deserves to be remembered.

219 Pugh, *The Tories and the People,* pp 178, 180.
220 See my *Tory Heroine: Dorothy Brant and the Rise of Conservative Women* (Sumfield & Day, 2008).
221 Pugh, *The Tories and the People,* p.180.
222 Sir Gervais Rentoul, *This is My Case: An Autobiography* (Hutchinson, n.d), pp 124-5. Rentoul, Chairman of the 1922 Committee, was the one MP who felt able to 'face the prospect of being cooped up on an ocean liner' with the enthusiastic activists. 'At Lisbon we had the satisfaction of being described as "figuras eminentes da politica inglesa", whilst the people of Algiers prided themselves in welcoming a "caravane distingué d'hommes politiques anglais" '.
223 Stuart Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald: The Headlam Diaries 1923-1935* (The Historians' Press, 1992), p.281.
224 R.R. James (ed.), *"Chips": The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (Weidenfeld paperback edition, 1993), p.21.
225 Grand Council Minutes, 18 July 1935, Primrose League Papers, MS 7/1 f.214.
226 Grand Council Minutes, 2 February 1933, ibid. f.80.
227 Grand Council Minutes, 5 July 1934, ibid.f.160.
228 For a discussion of this point, see my *Tory Policy-Making: The Conservative Research Department 1929-2009* (Conservative Research Department, 2009), pp 20-1.
229 Grand Council Minutes, 6 July 1939, Primrose League Papers, MS. 7/1 f.451.
230 Grand Council Minutes, 3 March 1932, ibid.f.31.
231 Grand Council Minutes, 8 July 1937, ibid.f.326.
232 For details, see Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative leadership and national values* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp 131-3.
233 Letter from Stanley Baldwin, 11 February 1938, Primrose League Papers, MS. 7/1.f.357.
234 See my *Party of Change: A Brief History of the Conservatives* (Conservative Research Department, 2008), p.18.
235 Primrose League website.
236 Grand Council Minutes, 4 November 1937, Primrose League Papers, MS. 7/1f.342.
237 Grand Council Minutes, 7 January 1954, Primrose League Papers, MS. 9 f.1.
238 *The Primrose League Handbook* (n.d., but 'war-time issue'), p.1.
239 Churchill to Lord Ebbisham , 7 October 1943, Churchill Papers, CHAR 20/94B/178.
240 Winston S. Churchill, *Europe Unite: Speeches 1947 and 1948*. Edited by Randolph S. Churchill (Cassell, 1950), pp.60-1.
241 A valuable discussion of Churchill and Tory democracy can be found in Paul Addison, 'The Political Beliefs of Winston Churchill', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* Fifth Series, Vol. 30 (1980), pp 23-47.
242 Lord Chesham to Churchill, 25 April 1958, Churchill Papers, CHUR 2/368/3.
243 Quoted in Martin Gilbert, '*Never Despair': Winston S. Churchill 1945-1965* (Heineman, 1988), p.366.

244 Winston S. Churchill, *The Unwritten Alliance: Speeches 1953 to 1959.* Edited by Randolph S. Churchill (Cassell, 1961), p.294.
245 Ibid., p.285.
246 Grand Council Minutes, 3 February 1955, Primrose League Papers, MS. 9 f.75.
247 Grand Council Minutes, 3 November 1955, ibid.f.105.
248 Clarissa Eden, *A Memoir: From Churchill to Eden* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007), p.201 quoting her diary '7-12 April, Chequers, Easter'.
249 Grand Council Minutes, 6 February 1963, Primrose League Papers, MS.9 f.223.
250 Lord Chesham to Churchill, 16 December 1958, Churchill Papers, CHUR 2/368/297.
251 Grand Council Minutes, 21 January 1976, Primrose League Papers, MS. 9 f.400.
252 Thatcher Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.
253 Grand Council Minutes, 2 February 1972, ibid. f.354.
254 Grand Council Minutes, 18 November 1976, ibid, f.412.
255 *The Daily Telegraph,* 16 December 2004.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The papers of the Primrose League, on which I have drawn extensively, are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. They provide a detailed account of the League's activities, as recorded by its Grand Council and other bodies, from its formation in 1883 until the end of 1977 when the minute books cease.

I have also made full use of the relevant documents – largely correspondence – in the papers of Lord and Lady Randolph Churchill, and of Sir Winston, at the Churchill Archives Centre in Churchill College, Cambridge.

I am indebted to Mr Robin Harcourt Williams, Librarian and Archivist at Hatfield House, for sending me copies of two letters illustrating the great Lord Salisbury's attitude to the Primrose League's, and the Conservative Party's, organisation. He also kindly supplied two splendid illuminated addresses sent to the Prime Minister by Primrose League habitations. I am very grateful to The Most Hon. The Marquess of Salisbury, DL for permission to reproduce them in this book.

Life in the Primrose League emerges in all its curious and distinctive ramifications in the journals of one of its leading dames, Lady Knightley of Fawsley. Superbly edited by Dr Peter Gordon, they were published by the Northamptonshire Record Office in 1999 under the title *Politics and Society: The Journals of Lady Knightley of Fawsley 1885-1913.* There are also a few useful

references, on which I have drawn, in her earlier journals covering the years 1856 to 1884 edited by Julia Cartwright which were published in 1916, entitled *The Journals of Lady Knightley of Fawsley*.

Thanks to the resourcefulness and dedication of Mr John King, a great deal of information can be found on the website which he constructed and maintains as a remarkable service to all those interested in the Primrose League. It has been extremely useful to me.

There are two fine published studies of the League: Janet Robb, *The Primrose League* (first published 1942: new edition AMS Press, New York, 1968) and Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People 1880-1935* (Basil Blackwell, 1985).

The leading Conservatives who feature prominently in the Primrose story – Disraeli, Lord Randolph Churchill, Sir Winston, the great Lord Salisbury and Stanley Baldwin – have been well served by (most of) their biographers. Full details of the published lives on which I have drawn, and of the other books and articles which I have used, appear in the footnotes at the end of each chapter of this study.

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