

**ENGLISH
MORTHIES.
MARLBOROUGH**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649643721

English Morthies. Marlborough by George Saintsbury

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GEORGE SAINTSBURY

**ENGLISH
MORTHIES.
MARLBOROUGH**

English Worthies

EDITED BY ANDREW LANG

MARLBOROUGH

BY

GEORGE SAINTSBURY

LONDON

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.

1888

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MARLBOROUGH.

CHAPTER I.

YOUTH AND EARLY CAMPAIGNS.

JOHN CHURCHILL, Duke of Marlborough, is the subject of not the least known or the worst executed of standard biographies in English.¹ He has also been celebrated

¹ *Memoirs of the Duke of Marlborough*, by W. Coxe. The edition used here is that edited by J. Wade in Bohn's Standard Library, 3 vols. 8vo. with atlas in 4to. Although Coxe wrote more than sixty years ago, it is surprising how few mistakes have been detected in his work, and how few valuable additions have been made to it by the abundant overhauling of documents which the last half-century has seen. A short bibliography of works on Marlborough will be found subjoined to the Index. It is said that the best known English soldier of the present day has an elaborate work on Marlborough in preparation, or at least in contemplation. The excellent little book of Mrs. Creighton (London, 1879) deserves mention here all the more that my attempt in no way competes with hers. Her object was to sketch the history of England and Europe as Marlborough was concerned with it; mine is to attempt a portrait of Marlborough's life and character, taking knowledge of the historical surroundings mostly for granted. The only other recent book which has to be mentioned is the late Dr. J. Hill Burton's *Reign of Queen Anne* (3 vols. Edinburgh and London, 1880), a singular mixture of desultory learning and capricious judgment, which will sometimes be quoted.

or defamed, criticised or merely anecdotised by a vast number of other pens, whose productions have not, like Archdeacon Coxe's, furnished necessary items to the catalogue of every gentleman's library. But what is noticeable in all these books, and especially noticeable in Coxe's, is the disproportionate space allotted to his period of brilliant military success and political influence. Marlborough was fifty-two years old at the accession of Queen Anne; he outlived her eight years. Yet a not too laborious calculation will establish the fact that Coxe gives about one-twentieth of his entire space to the first five-sevenths of his hero's life. That to the purely military historian the history of those brilliant campaigns in which, alone of great modern soldiers, Marlborough proved himself invincible for a long series of years, dwarfs all the rest of his history may be freely granted; that he contributed more to the making of the English Empire in these years than in any others is also certain. Finally (a circumstance which, biographers being human, must be allowed its weight), the material available for biographical use during these years far exceeds in amount the material available for the rest of the life. But it is seldom that in the case of a man of great parts, and raised to fortune not by the mere turn of fortune's wheel, it is safe to concentrate attention on one part of his career. For the estimate of Marlborough's character and personality, which is the chief object here, the desertion of James II. is a matter certainly not to be treated less fully than the battle of Blenheim, or the question of complicity in the *quet-apens* at Brest than the circumstances of the victory of Malplaquet.

Marlborough was born on Midsummer day, 1650, at Ashe, a Devonshire manorhouse, between Axminster and Seaton, which is still in existence. His father, Sir Winston Churchill (who, however, was not yet knighted), had been a man of some property, a soldier, and in his way an author, nor is his folio of English history, 'Divi Britannici,' more deserving of the scorn which Macaulay's pen throws as a matter of course on the production of a Cavalier squire than might be expected. But Ashe was not a seat of the Churchills; it belonged, and continued to belong till the end of the last century, to the old Devonshire family of Drake, the Drakes, with whom Sir Francis was not connected, though he assumed their arms, and was thereby involved in a somewhat ludicrous quarrel. Mary Drake (others call her Elizabeth), John Churchill's mother and Sir Winston's wife, was the granddaughter of the Sir Bernard Drake whose family pride had declined to welcome a distinguished but *parvenu* namesake, and the Churchill property of Mintern¹ having been sequestrated she was fain to seek a refuge with her own family. All her children from Winston, the eldest son, who died young, were born at Ashe. John was the second son, and of the other children the most notable were George, John's younger brother, and Arabella, his eldest sister, the mistress of James II. and the mother of Berwick. No one seems to have discovered in any Churchill ancestor a forewarning of the extraordinary military genius which in this generation

¹ Sir Winston Churchill's designation is of 'Wooton Glanville,' Wooton Glanville and Mintern (Magna and Parva) are neighbouring villages of Dorset nearly in the centre of the county, and between Cerne Abbas and Sherborne.

John showed in his own person and Arabella transmitted to her son, but the family was an old one, and had 'come over with Richard Conqueror.' Very little is recorded of Marlborough's early youth. His father and a neighbouring clergyman are said to have given him such education as he possessed, though after the Restoration (when Sir Winston, more fortunate than many Cavaliers, was not merely knighted but recovered his estate and obtained some post about Court) he was for a time—it is not certainly known how long—at St. Paul's School. One of the rare stories about his early days recounts that he was fond of reading the Latin tactician Vegetius. The evidence is, as evidence of anecdotes goes, indifferent good, for the Rev. G. North, rector of Colyton, testified that he heard it from an eye-witness and schoolfellow of Churchill's about two years after the Duke's death. Intrinsically it is suspicious, and the suggestion of rationalists that, instead of reading, the future warrior was looking at the illustrations, possesses plausibility; but there is no reason for regarding it as impossible that Marlborough may have had and forgotten a smattering of Latin, while Macaulay exaggerates, as usual, the badness of his English spelling. Facsimiles of his writing are easily accessible, and will show anyone who is at all conversant with seventeenth-century ways that Marlborough in this branch of accomplishment was little worse than most men not professed scholars, and a great deal better than most women. The well-known saying that he learnt all the English history he knew out of Shakespeare is another of the anecdotes which only dulness takes literally. The son of the author of 'Divi Britannici' is

nearly certain to have received historical instruction from the author of that work, though if Shakespeare's teaching stuck in his memory better it is not to his discredit. The story, however, is of some value as illustrating the baselessness, easily proved from other sources, of a notion—often put forward in vulgar histories of literature and the stage—that Shakespeare was forgotten in England during the last half of the seventeenth century.

The success of the Churchill family at Court is made a rather awkward subject by the notorious fact that Arabella Churchill, who became maid of honour to the Duchess of York (the first Duchess, Anne Hyde) soon after the Restoration, also became the mistress of her mistress's husband. It is, however, asserted, or hoped, by the biographers that John's appointment to an ensigncy in the Foot Guards at the age of sixteen preceded the *liaison* between James and Arabella. If the Duke of Berwick was right as to the date of his own birth¹ there is fortunately no unsurmountable difficulty in accepting the more charitable view of the foundation, if not the rise, of Marlborough's fortunes. Appointed page to the Duke, he is said to have taken advantage of James's presence at a review, and of his asking what profession the boy preferred, to beg for a pair of colours. James, though always careful of money, was not at this time ungenerous or churlish to his friends, and it is not necessary to believe that the sister's dishonour bought the brother's entrance into the career where he afterwards won more honour for himself and

¹ He says (*Mémoires*, ed. Michaud et Poujoulat, *xxi*, 371), 'Je naquis le 21 août 1670.' John Churchill was 16 in 1666.