DUFF COOPER
The Authorized Biography

John Charmley

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First Beginning

The quiet home was 9 Henrietta Street, Cavendish Square, London; the first beginning was on 22 February 1890. Alfred Duff Cooper was the fourth surviving child and only son of Dr Alfred and Lady Agnes Cooper. His Christian names celebrated his parentage: Alfred after his father and Duff after his mother’s maiden name. Despite the best efforts of later journalists, there was no hyphen in his name. No one ever called him ‘Alfred’, he was always ‘Duff’ or ‘Duffie’, and as his character showed more trace of maternal than paternal influence, this was as it should have been.

Although interested in history, Duff never cared for discussing that of his own family. In order that we should understand the nature of the quiet home which helped to form his character, it is necessary to disregard his example.

Family legend may trace the lineage of the Duffs of Fife back to that Macduff who slew Macbeth, but Debretts prefers to start with William Duff, MP for Banffshire in the early eighteenth century; we may begin with his grand-nephew, James, the fifth Earl Fife. It was he who added a dash of Hanoverian blood to the lineage. In 1846 he married Lady Agnes Hay whose mother, Lady Erroll, was one of the brood of nine Fitzclarences who were the offspring of the liaison between the future William IV and the actress Mrs Jordan. James and Lady Agnes were married in Paris, at the same Embassy over which their grandson was to preside a century later. Whenever one of the family behaved in an unconventional way, Duff’s half-sister, Marie Hay, would attribute it to ‘the Jordan blood’; the third child of the marriage of James and Agnes Fife, Lady Agnes Cecil Emmeline Duff, was evidently endowed with more than her fair share of it.

Born in 1852, she was brought up largely at Duff House, near Banff. The Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, was a frequent visitor,
and his eldest daughter, Princess Louise, married the Fifes' only son in 1889. Lady Agnes was a pretty and lively young woman, slightly too lively perhaps, for in 1871 at the age of nineteen she eloped with the handsome and dashing Viscount Dupplin, heir to the Earldom of Kinnoul. It was a suitable match and received the family's blessing. At first all seemed well. In 1873 a daughter, christened Agnes Blanche Marie, was born; as Marie Hay she was to enjoy some reputation as an historical novelist; she married a relative of Field Marshal von Hindenburg and spent most of her life in Germany. Then, in 1875 came the rush of Jordan blood to the head. In April of that year Lady Agnes Dupplin eloped with a young man named Herbert Flower.

Herbert Flower had been a frequent visitor to the Dupplins' London residence, 13 Grosvenor Gardens, and evidently captured the heart of the unhappily married Lady Agnes. After her elopement they 'lived together as husband and wife from 20 May to 2 June' 1875 at the Castle Hotel, Dartmouth. They were living in a house in the same town when, in July 1876, Dupplin was granted a decree nisi. Little Marie went to live with her father's people, Lady Agnes married Herbert and they went on a world cruise.

'They are not long, the days of wine and roses'; and so it proved in this case. In 1880, at the age of twenty-seven, Herbert Flower, the great passion of Lady Agnes's life, died, leaving her grief-stricken and alone. Her family had ostracized her after her actions and the doors of Society remained firmly closed to the young widow. But the Jordan blood ran to resourcefulness as well as passion.

Agnes took herself off to London where, in the hope of learning to become a nurse, she took menial jobs at one of the big hospitals. While scrubbing the floor one day in 1882 she attracted the attention of one of the consulting surgeons; to appreciate what happened next we need to turn our attention to that surgeon – Alfred Cooper.

Born in Norwich in 1838, his was a classic Victorian success story. Although the Coopers had a tradition of following the law as a profession, he preferred medicine. After a spell at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, he completed his training at St Bartholomew's in London. It was there that he set up consulting rooms in Jermyn Street in the early 1860s; he must already have made some mark to have acquired a practice in such a fashionable area. His specialisms were the treatment of bronchial and venereal diseases and he became a consulting surgeon for several London hospitals. The former branch of medicine
was to bring him the friendship of the Prince of Wales; the latter his most lasting claim to fame.

He was evidently a man of parts, for among his friends he counted noblemen such as the Duke of Hamilton, who presented him with a lodge on the Isle of Arran; he was a well-known figure in London Clubland and on the grouse-moors of Scotland. As a fashionable surgeon he accompanied the party which went to St Petersburg in 1874 for the wedding of the Duke of Edinburgh to the Tsar’s daughter. The Prince of Wales, who suffered from bronchial trouble, fell ill during the visit and it fell to Alfred Cooper to treat him. Thus began a firm friendship which culminated in Edward VII giving his old friend a knighthood in his Coronation Honours list in 1902. The incident set the seal on Cooper’s position in Society.

At some point during this successful career, Alfred Cooper had set eyes on Lady Agnes Duff – perhaps during one of the Prince of Wales’s visits to Duff House. He fell in love with her, but it must have seemed that his passion was doomed to remain unfulfilled. She was fourteen years younger, highly born and romantic – and soon married to someone else. But the sight of the young woman scrubbing floors reminded him of his lost love.

He mentioned that she looked like someone he had once known, Lady Agnes Duff. She confessed to being Lady Agnes Duff. Whether it happened quite like that we do not know, but it happened quickly, for in 1882 Dr Cooper married the girl of his dreams, and Lady Agnes settled down to life as Lady Agnes Cooper. It remained to be seen whether the Jordan blood had spent itself, and how it would affect the next generation.

The Cooper marriage was a long and successful one, as it should have been; all fairy stories have happy endings. Safely ensconced at 9 Henrietta Street, Lady Agnes produced her second family: Stephanie (Steffie) was born in 1883, Hermione (Mione) in 1885, and twins in 1888. Of these only the female, Sybil (Sibbie) survived. It was some consolation for the little girl when little Duffie was born two years later; from the start she adored the fair-haired, blue-eyed infant. Lady Agnes, of course, equally worshipped her only son, and Alfred was delighted to have an heir.

Duff once remarked that ‘in Heaven there is neither dining nor having to dine’; that was one of the respects in which home resembled Heaven. Lady Agnes’s past was neither forgiven nor forgotten. Although it is said that the Prince of Wales told his son-in-law that
he was not to cut his sister, contact between Lady Agnes and her family was strictly limited. As there were no Cooper relations, and as Lady Agnes's past was still remembered in Society, visitors at 9 Henrietta Street were not common. The Cooper children were thrown back on their own resources and lacked that extended family circle which so often acclimatizes children to the society of others.

Duff's childhood was made the more secluded by his delicate health and, despite pleasant visits to the Cooper-Angus lodge on Arran, it must have been excruciatingly boring had it not been for the attentions of Sibbie. It was she who introduced him to the delights of literature. Together they would act scenes from Shakespeare, memorize large chunks of Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, and construct, from the contents of their parents' library, a world of make-believe.

This sheltered childhood made up in love and affection for what it lacked in social life. If we may trace the origin of his later shyness and his preference for small select groups to his early isolation, there are other respects in which the child seems the father of the man. Duff enjoyed to the full that feeling of being a conqueror which Freud attributes to the male child who knows he is the undisputed favourite of his mother. Lady Agnes adored her little boy, and his earliest years were spent with a mother and sister who gave him no reason to doubt that he was the centre of the universe. He retained always that unselfish egotism characteristic of the young child. His was, he once wrote, 'au fond a happy nature', and he accepted the world with the assurance of one who knows that it is a place which values him.

It was a childhood which laid the foundations of his political success in the training which it gave to his remarkable memory and to the development of his oratorical skills; and it is not, perhaps, too fanciful to see in it some of the reasons why politics failed totally to absorb him. The world of literature beckoned. The ability to adapt to the company of strangers was never inculcated.

But amateur psychology is a dangerous speculation and had best not be pursued too far. Kindergarten at the age of six, followed by two prep schools left, however, little trace compared with 9 Henrietta Street. The shy and bookish little boy is only a stage or two removed from the man, but those stages were important ones. Eton, to which he went when he was thirteen, was to begin the process of forming the carapace behind which the youth would, as he approached adolescence, be able to cope in that wider world which lay outside the quiet home and first beginning.
In later life Duff was often compared to Charles James Fox, the rakish, charming, eighteenth-century Whig politician; Duff accepted the comparison with pleasure as an unconscious tribute to the artistry with which he had modelled himself on Fox, who became his great hero.

In his early years at Eton, Duff remained a rather shy youth, spending more time in the library than with his fellows or on the famous playing-fields. His academic performance was all that the fondest father could have asked for: he showed a considerable aptitude for the classics and for literature and history, reading widely and retaining what he read. His reports said that he was ‘working splendidly in every way’, which gave his father ‘very great pleasure as I have ever hoped you would take such a position at Eton’. He became captain of his house, and his poetry was published not only in a college magazine but also in the Saturday Review, although this last feat may well have owed something to the fact that Sibbie was a friend of the proprietor.

In fact, poetry became Duff’s great passion, and his earliest ambition was to become Poet Laureate, which amused his father who commented that it did not pay very well. Duff developed a particular fascination for Verlaine, Rimbaud and other poets of the Bohemian-romantic school, having a particular fondness for Ernest Dowson’s ‘Cynara’; he too longed to call for ‘madder music and for stronger wine’, at least in his imagination. In real life the adolescent Duff was more likely to ask for the latter; he remained deaf to the charms of music and could rarely sit through a concert, even if he could be lured into a concert hall. For wine, however, he was developing a taste.

During his many hours in the library, Duff read George Otto Trevelyon’s Life of Charles James Fox and thus fell under the powerful, and
usually fatal, spell of that Whig hero. Fox’s roistering, full-blooded life offered much to captivate the romantic adolescent. With no apparent effort he was the greatest orator of his age, a charming, worldly man, he spent his talents in friendship, his money (and his friends’ money) on gaming and women, and his health on drink. Duff admired his ‘brilliant success without undue application’ and sought to emulate him, having a strong fellow-feeling for Fox; if success could be ‘combined with dissipation’, all the better.

In his final years at Eton, and during his time at Oxford, he moved in a set of like-minded young men. They wrote verses, gambled and cultivated the habit of drinking more than most people would have thought was good for them. The carapace behind which Duff would face the world was thus formed: the cultured libertine for whom the only business was pleasure, and pleasure the main aim of living.

As he was destined for diplomacy, it was necessary for him to perfect his foreign languages. This he did in two spells: before going up to Oxford he went to Tours to improve his French; and after coming down he went to Hanover to do the same for his German. He enjoyed Tours more than Hanover; he certainly learned more there.

It was hardly likely that a handsome, romantic youth, with an admiration for Gallic culture and poetry, would confine his activities in Tours to book-learning; Duff certainly did not. It seems entirely fitting that his first love affair should have taken place in France, and quite in keeping with his desire to emulate Dowson that it should have happened when he was seventeen and his lover an older, more experienced, French Comtesse. The affair can now be reconstructed only from some half-dozen letters, written in a sprawling, passionate, female hand. The Comtesse d’Aulby found the ‘sweet, fresh lips’ of the handsome young Englishman a temptation beyond her powers of resistance. Evidently Duff did nothing to help her poor powers of self-restraint. She told him that he made her wish that ‘I were twenty years younger and that all sorts of impossible things were possible!!’:

A charming and attractive boy like you will always have many friends. Some may have a good influence over his life, others an evil one. I should not dare to say I could have a good one, but I hope at least it might not be the evil one. . . . You are so young, so unspoiled, so charming, so clever, one hates to think of all the worldliness that must be gone through with sooner or later.

If Duff’s later behaviour is anything to judge by, she must have provided an attractive introduction to at least one aspect of that
worldliness; for the rest of his life he was an eager pursuer and passionate lover of women.

His visit to Hanover, after leaving Oxford, was notable only for Duff being so bored that he even went to hear Caruso sing. It is no wonder that he was always a Francophile and a Germanophobe.

If his visit to Tours was one milestone passed, it was soon followed by another. In the spring of 1908, Sir Alfred Cooper died. This caused no unbearable sorrow; his father had always been a kind and affectionate parent, but never a close one. Duff felt that they had little, if anything, in common. In this he was probably wrong. Although he naturally felt a strong affinity with his romantic Duff ancestors, he was also his father's son. He inherited Sir Alfred's taste for the good things of life, for well-cut clothes and London Clubland. He also shared his father's passion for shooting. No doubt the penchant for the youngest daughter of a peer was accidental. Nor did Duff entirely forget his paternal roots. When he became a peer he took the title of Norwich as an act of filial piety; not that the officials of that fine and historic city were impressed.

Another veneer was added to the portrait by his experience of Oxford. In 1908 he went up to New College and found, in Edwardian Oxford, ample scope to develop his cult of Charles James Fox. The aristocratic, Whiggish milieu of his final years at Eton was even more predominant in his Oxford career. His best friends were those who shared his full-blooded enjoyment of pleasure, and he moved in a rakish set of 'bloods'. His closest friends, Denis Anson and Billy Grenfell, were both aristocratic rakehells. His set was patrician, reckless, cultivated and witty. Through Anson, Grenfell, and his other great friend, John Manners, Duff came to know most of the jeuness dorée of his generation and first entered the sort of society in which he was to pass most of his life.

Philip Ziegler, in his biography of Lady Diana, has said all that needs to be said about the 'Corrupt Coterie'. Like all such coteries, its members imagined that they were the centre of the world and that their doings were of enormous importance to everyone else; such verdicts are seldom endorsed by posterity. Through Billy Grenfell Duff came to Taplow Court, the country home of his parents, Lord and Lady Desborough. In her youth, Lady Desborough had been a member of that other self-absorbed coterie of the 1870s, the 'Souls', and the children of her soulful friends were often to be found at Taplow, including the daughters of the Duchess of Rutland – the beautiful