

"Knowledgeable, lucid . . . the best English biography of de Gaulle."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

A LIFE OF GENERAL DE GAULLE

*The
Last
Great
Frenchman*

CHARLES WILLIAMS

The Last Great Frenchman

A LIFE OF
GENERAL DE GAULLE

Charles Williams



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The Last Great Frenchman

For Jane

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To France, to Notre Dame la France,
this and this only have we to say today:
that nothing is of moment to us, nothing of concern to us,
except to serve her.
Of her we have nothing to ask, save perhaps this:
that on the Day of Deliverance
she find it in her heart to open to us a mother's arms
and let us weep there:
and on the day when death will come to take us
she shroud us in her kind and holy earth.

Charles de Gaulle
Tunis 27 June 1943

PREFACE

I suppose that, in the end, it was a sense of the romance of it, in the classical meaning of the word, that moved me to write the story of General de Gaulle. The more I looked at it, the more I felt in my imagination that the story could easily have been narrated, in an earlier time and in a different context, by a medieval balladeer: the humble origins, the early setbacks, the fiery determination to meet a great challenge, the rejection by his own kind, the passage in the wilderness and then the triumphant return to power – the whole poem shot through with a deep feeling for history and the use of language.

Be that as it may, my adventure was, I admit, presumptuous. At the latest count, some 1400 books or articles have been written about de Gaulle, analysing in scholarly detail almost every aspect of a long life. There have been many biographies, the prince of which is the fine three-volume work by Jean Lacouture. Others preceded him, and others have followed. All in all, the furrow that I was proposing to plough had already been well and truly ploughed by many, I have to confess, much better qualified than myself.

Nevertheless, the story – and in this book I treat it as such – bears repeating and elaborating. Furthermore, the 100th anniversary of de Gaulle's birth in 1990 brought an effusion of new material about the man, his origins, his upbringing, his military career and his family life, material which has not to date found its way into coherent form in a biography. We now know much more about this extraordinary and contradictory personality than we did a few years ago.

Perhaps more important, the resurgence of interest in de Gaulle, not least because of the political developments in Europe – the greater Europe – over the last few years, seemed to me to justify retelling the de

Gaulle story, particularly in English and in terms that those brought up in the whole cultural complex of the English language, or 'Anglo-Saxons' as the General would have called us, can understand.

My initial diffidence was overcome by the encouragement of a number of friends, colleagues and acquaintances whom I consulted about the project. First and foremost, Admiral Philippe de Gaulle gave me what I would describe as a friendly *nil obstat*. In turn, Michael Palliser, Roy Jenkins, Denis Greenhill, Max Beloff, Gladwyn Jebb, Nicholas Henderson and Ted Willis – if I may use for the moment their names as friends, rather than their formal titles – all added their authoritative voices to what became a chorus that, in all vanity, I found impossible to resist. I am beyond measure grateful to them, since without them, or even without their unanimity of support, I believe that my courage would have failed me.

Once embarked on the project, I found that there was a wider groundswell of enthusiasm to help which gave further encouragement. Almost everybody whom I approached, as well as those who came to me of their own accord, wanted to talk about de Gaulle. Each had his or her own de Gaulle anecdote and was only too anxious to relate it to me. In truth, some of these were apocryphal, and some simply repeated others previously heard; but I mention the fact only to show that the memory of the General, good or bad according to the experience of individuals, is still very much alive.

Inevitably, the book relies heavily on secondary sources. I have tried to list in the bibliography all those that have been useful. Nevertheless I have had the great benefit of discussion with many who knew de Gaulle personally, and I can only thank them most warmly for the time and trouble they took to help me in my work. On the British side, if I may use that expression, I am deeply indebted to Lady Soames, Lord Gladwyn, the Earl of Bessborough, Lord Sherfield (formerly Roger Makins), Baroness Warnock ('Roo' in Elisabeth de Gaulle's letters) and Neal Ascherson, who was with de Gaulle on his visit to Poland in 1967. I mention them in particular, but there were many others who helped, even by references in casual conversation. All of them have added to my perception of the General's character. On the French side, to use an expression of equivalent inaccuracy, I am particularly grateful to M. Bernard Tricot, M. Pierre Messmer and M. Pierre Lefranc for their kindness in seeing me and giving me the benefit of their personal experiences of a man they so obviously loved and honoured. There are also many French friends, dating particularly from the three and a

half years I spent in Paris at the end of de Gaulle's last period in power, who will recognise their contribution – even in the smallest phrase – to the book.

Even though secondary sources may be reliable, there is still a matter of probing, interpreting and sometimes expanding the information that they report. There, too, I have had invaluable help. Professor Bernard Smith has devoured books on my behalf, with a facility to extract relevant information at what turned out to be an alarming speed. He was also the main compiler of the short biographical footnotes. Philip Bell, of the University of Liverpool, patiently read through each chapter as it appeared in draft and corrected the many errors each contained, as well as pointing me to sources of which – with his great knowledge of, and insight into, modern Franco-British relations – he was aware and which I had missed. I think that I can truly say that without them this book could not have seen the light of any reasonable day. Of all those who helped me I have to give both of them the joint ultimate accolade.

In relation to particular specialities, Lord Carver advised on tank warfare, and Lord McColl of Dulwich on certain intricacies of medicine. Christopher Wade, historian supreme of Hampstead, gave me information on the Frogmal period, and George Ball was kind enough to correspond with me on the de Gaulle–Roosevelt relationship. Baroness Warnock gave me sight of the letters to her from Elisabeth de Gaulle over a number of years in the 1940s. Lord Sherfield dug into his memory and his archives to help me with his recollections of life in Algiers in 1943–44 and allowed me to quote excerpts from the letters he wrote to his wife at the time. Lady Soames was particularly helpful in her accounts of meetings with the General, from the war period right through to her life as the wife of the British ambassador to Paris in the 1960s. Seamus McConville, of *The Kerryman* in Tralee, County Kerry, produced some fascinating material on de Gaulle's stay in Ireland at the end of his life. I am grateful to all of them.

Nevertheless, libraries have been all-important, and I have everywhere received efficient and courteous help. My special thanks go to Steven Sowards, Humanities Librarian at the McCabe Library, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, and to Mme Françoise Lafon, Information Officer (Education) of the British Council in Paris. Thanks also to the staffs of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth; the Hugh Owen Library, University College, Aberystwyth; and the Public Record Office at Kew.

Pride of place, however, must go to the House of Lords Library, and in particular to Isolde Victory, Anne Kelly (before she left to get married), Celia Adams and Parthenope Ward, all of whom put up uncomplainingly with the usual tantrums of an author and launched themselves into tracking down improbable sources without so much as a half-raised eyebrow. Following not far behind in honour is the Institut Charles de Gaulle in Paris, and in particular M. Bruno Leroux, always unfailingly willing and helpful.

Finally, I thank those who were asked, and willingly volunteered, for the penance of reading my final draft: Sir Michael Palliser, Lord Willis (now, alas, dead), Godfrey Hodgson and Bernard Tricot. It was a daunting task, but undertaken without hesitation, and the result of their efforts has been a very much improved final product. Martin Gilbert very kindly helped with the proofs; and Alan Samson and Helga Houghton of Little, Brown have been indefatigable in bringing the ship safely to port. In spite of all this expert help, I realise the result is far from perfect, and I hope that it goes without saying that I alone am responsible for the errors and flaws that remain.

This book is dedicated to my wife in gratitude for her support in everything I do, and in particular for her constructive criticism of my first literary endeavour. Without her love and encouragement, none of this could possibly have happened.

Pant-y-Rhiw
April 1993

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PROLOGUE

Colombey

COLOMBEY

*C'est ma demeure.**

On the morning of Sunday 14 September 1958 both men were nervous. Konrad Adenauer, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany was nervous at the very idea of visiting France at all, let alone visiting the new French Prime Minister in his own home. As the convoy of three lumbering Mercedes-Benz limousines, with their four motorcycle outriders, drove through village after village – each with its own carefully tended cemetery where lay buried the French soldiers who had died at German hands – his nervousness increased. France was hostile; the new man was said to be autocratic and offensive. Perhaps, he thought, the whole project had been a bad error of judgement.

The Prime Minister of France, on the other hand, General Charles de Gaulle, was nervous for a different reason. The Germans, quite unexpectedly, were late. They had stopped by mistake at Colombey-les-Belles, and had wasted valuable time. There was nothing to be done but wait. The problem was that lunch, carefully prepared under the strict instructions of Mme de Gaulle, who had never wanted the Germans in her home in the first place, would undoubtedly be spoiled.

When they finally arrived, Adenauer's car had to manoeuvre its way carefully through the narrow gateway into the property marked 'Private'. It was followed, equally carefully, by the second car; and then the iron gates were shut against further intrusion. Guards with sub-machine-guns protected the entrance. The two cars moved slowly down the drive, and turned on the gravelled space in front of the house. De Gaulle was waiting in the doorway, just out of sight.

* 'It's my home.' Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre*, vol.3, page 288; Plon, Paris, 1959.