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## ONE

### *His mother's side: The Hoziers*

A few months after his first wife divorced him for adultery Sir Henry Montague Hozier (1838–1907) married Lady Blanche Ogilvy, and soon that marriage too fell apart. He was forty and she only twenty-six when they married in 1878. He was not a rich man, but his family, although of humble origins (originally the family name was MacLehose, changed in a groan-inducing pun to Hozier), was now substantial and respected, he was a close friend of Blanche's mother, and he had had a brilliant military career. He wrote widely on all the campaigns in which he fought or observed, and he was a pioneer of the intelligence service. In 1874 he left the army to join Lloyd's of London, where he made another brilliant career; in particular, he was one of the first to realise the possibilities of radiotelegraphy, and was the driving force behind Lloyd's creation of a linking network of telegraphic stations. He was knighted in 1903.

As a husband, however, he was less satisfactory. He was unfaithful to his wife, she was unfaithful to him. Whoever fathered them, she had three daughters and a son. Katharine, always called Kitty, was born in 1883, Clementine in 1885, the twins Margaret Nellie (always called Nellie) and William (Bill) in 1888. Sir Henry seems to have believed, at least for a time, that Kitty and Clementine were his children, but he ignored the twins.

Somehow the marriage struggled on until in 1891 Hozier discovered his wife was having an affair, and sued for divorce. When Blanche's brother tried to obtain some decent financial settlement for her, Hozier threatened to make her adultery public, but the Airlie lawyers had evidence of Hozier's own infidelity, and a legal separation was quietly arranged. Custody battles raged over the children. The twins stayed with their mother, while Kitty and Clementine went to live with Hozier (who presumably at that time accepted his paternity), and for a time Blanche did not even know their whereabouts. Soon, however, the girls were back with their mother, and their father disappeared from their lives.

With little or no maintenance from her husband, Lady Blanche had a hard time supporting her children. Her parents helped as they could, but they were not rich and they had other children to provide for. She could only afford to rent furnished rooms, but she cared about her surroundings and decorated her makeshift homes to her own elegant taste. She was a slapdash housekeeper but a good cook, and she earned money from articles on cookery for the *Daily Express* – ‘Perfection in the Sauce Boat’ and ‘More Recipes from My Note Book’, for instance. However hard-up she was, she never stinted on her children’s education. They always had a full-time governess, usually French or German, and went to the best schools their mother could afford.

In the later 1890s Lady Blanche and her children lived for most of the year at Seaford, near Newhaven in Sussex. By 1899 she was heavily in debt and in poor health. Her husband was in arrears with maintenance and there were Bill’s school expenses. Her mother and brother helped her out financially, and her brother took legal steps to make Hozier pay up. In July of that year, perhaps fearing that her husband might make another bid for custody of Kitty and Clementine – that he never showed any interest in Nellie and Bill seems to confirm the story that they were not his children – Lady Blanche suddenly moved to Dieppe. The story in the family is that she tossed a coin to decide which of two nearby villages they should live in: Puy or Pourville. The coin came down for Puy, and she secured lodgings at La Ferme des Colombiers, beautifully situated right on the coast. At the end of the summer they moved into Dieppe itself, renting 49 rue du Fauborg de la Barre, convenient for the girls’ school, the Convent of the Immaculate Conception, an incongruous name in the circumstances. Later Blanche bought two houses in Dieppe, St Antoine and Petit St Antoine.

Dieppe was then a fashionable seaside resort much frequented in summer by the Parisian *haute monde*. It also had a sizeable English community, and it was popular with writers and painters – Oscar Wilde, Walter Sickert, Max Beerbohm had all lived or visited there. Sickert in particular became a close friend of Lady Blanche. In *Pigtails and Pernod* Simona Pakenham, who spent childhood summers there in the 1920s, wrote that Lady Blanche

exercised a baleful influence over the whole life of Dieppe... [also

she] had a nice aim with a hose over her garden wall and had been known to choose the front windows of her house for the purpose of emptying slops. [‘Slops’ could mean used washing water or leftover drinks, or the contents of chamberpots.] Those who had offended her in any way learned to give the appropriately named rue des Fontaines a wide berth.<sup>1</sup>

There are other stories about Lady Blanche’s high-handedness. The most popular is of the time she smuggled her little dog Gubbins (who smelt like a camembert, according to Simona Pakenham) through Customs at Newhaven. In one version she hid the dog under her fur coat; in another, inside her fur muff.<sup>2</sup> French Customs officials were suspicious, and alerted their English counterparts, but Lady Blanche swept haughtily past and made them carry her luggage (or flung open one side of her coat and demanded to know whether they could not trust a lady’s word), and later complained to her son-in-law Churchill of the slackness of the Customs and Quarantine people. In the version Jessica heard and passed on to her children, the dog barked as she was going through Customs. ‘Is that a dog, madam?’ asked an official. ‘Certainly NOT, said Lady Blanche, and went on her way.

Dieppe had a casino, and Lady Blanche was soon a dedicated gambler, as her father had been and as were her two youngest children and her grandson Esmond. Her son Bill’s suicide in 1921 was thought to be over gambling debts. In 1924 Clementine Churchill spent a couple of weeks in Dieppe with her mother, and wrote home to her husband:

... it is here that Bill saw gambling from his childhood & used to come after he was grown up... I went with Nellie to the Casino the other night & I was astounded at the very reckless manner in which both Mother & Nellie gambled. Nellie very intelligently & dashingly, Mother in a superstitious and groping manner. It made me feel quite ill & ashamed... Bill’s grim & lonely end has not made the slightest difference...<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pakenham, p. 61

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Mitford must have heard this story, for in *The Pursuit of Love* Linda smuggles her dog back into England by hiding it under her coat.

<sup>3</sup> Soames, *Clementine Churchill*, p. 241.

In 1900 Blanche's eldest child, Kitty, died of typhoid fever. After her death the family returned to England to live, although they kept the Dieppe house. They settled in Berkhamsted, which offered good schools, the Berkhamsted High School for Girls for Clementine and Nellie, and the Berkhamsted Grammar School for Bill. In 1903 Bill left school, and decided on a career in the navy, joining HMS *Britannia*.

The family wintered in Paris, then took a London house for Clementine's debut. In 1907 Nellie had been diagnosed as having TB, and was sent to a clinic at Nordrach. She had recovered in time for Clementine's wedding to Winston Churchill in September 1908, at which she was one of the bridesmaids in biscuit satin with large black hats wreathed with camellias and roses. The bride's mother sat surrounded by at least three of her lovers, including Lord Redesdale.

Just as Esmond complained of being 'nephew of', so Nellie now became 'sister of Mrs Churchill' or 'sister-in-law of Mr Churchill'. Churchill had learnt to fly, so when Nellie went up in a plane in May 1914 the headline was: 'Mr. Churchill Outdone. First [Sea] Lord's Sister-in-Law Loops the Loop Twice on her First Air Trip.'<sup>4</sup>

At the start of the 1914 war Nellie escorted her mother back to England from Dieppe, then hurried off to help Lady Astor convert their country house, Cliveden, into a convalescent home. Soon she was off to Belgium as secretary and interpreter to a nursing unit organised by her friend Lady Angela Manners. Clementine was furious: 'It is all cheap emotion. Nellie is not trained, she will be one more useless mouth to feed in that poor little country... [her] obvious and natural duty is to look after Mother...' No doubt *it was partly* emotion, the patriotic fervour and fear of missing out that swept up so many people at the start of the war, but there were plenty of people to look after Mother. (In fact Mother was parked in a cottage on her brother-in-law Lord Redesdale's Oxfordshire estate, where she shocked and intrigued the older Mitford children by going around in her nightie, barelegged.<sup>5</sup>) In 1914 Nellie was twenty-six, free of domestic ties, independent, and she had skills to offer. Her action sounds both sensible and patriotic, and at the

<sup>4</sup> Newspaper cutting in private collection.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Mosley, *A life of Contrasts*, p. 30. Lady Blanche died in 1925.

very least it was better than staying home and handing out white feathers to any man not in uniform. Nellie was impetuous and larger-than-life, and she never lacked courage.

The nursing unit went first to Brussels, at the invitation of the Belgian Red Cross. Lady Angela Manners printed a report to subscribers to her unit: They went to Brussels with the intention of nursing Belgian wounded. After a fortnight, including working in a German field hospital (the Germans entered Brussels on 14 August 1914) they got to Mons on 27 August, and a German doctor gave them authority to open a 50-bed hospital for English wounded. A newspaper report by one of Nellie's nursing unit stated that first they used a Brussels convent with 100 beds; 14 Belgian wounded were there when they left to break into two parties and 'trekked' into the villages where they found 'wounded dying in hundreds'. They nursed German wounded and took charge of a convent near Montaigny with 350 beds, then went on to Mons when Brussels was occupied by the advancing German army. Nellie wrote a hasty letter home on 12 September 1914:

Darling Mother, Clem and Bill ... [at Mons]...where the battle was on Sunday [23-24 August.] – a German office brought 35 wounded English prisoners. I am just starting for Mons, with food and an operating table; difficult to get through without these being bagged by the Germans – we could not get to Antwerp, lucky as it is going to have an awful time. Most tender love, Nellie.<sup>6</sup>

At Mons the women of the unit were taken prisoner. More permanently taken prisoner by the Germans in 1940, Nellie's elder son, Giles, wrote to her: 'But of course you, Mummy, were once a prisoner of war... Wasn't a potato pushed at you through iron bars? I seem to remember that detail.'<sup>7</sup> Locked up temporarily in a railway station, Nellie scrawled on the wall:

Our good King George is both  
Greater and wiser,  
Then all other monarchs,  
Including 'der Kaiser'.

<sup>6</sup> In private collection.

<sup>7</sup> OSU, misfiled in the Unity Mitford folder.

How this went down with the Germans is not recorded, but the nursing unit was allowed to go on helping wounded British soldiers before being evacuated home towards the end of the year.

In 1915 Nellie met Lieutenant-Colonel Bertram Henry Samuel Romilly D.S.O., of the Scots Guards. A professional soldier since the age of twenty, he had fought in South Africa, where he was Mentioned in Despatches twice and awarded the DSO and the Queen's Medal with five clasps. Later he was attached to the Egyptian Camel Corps, and since the start of the Great War had served in France. He fell instantly in love with Nellie – and no wonder, for she was extraordinarily pretty – proposed and was refused. In May that year he was seriously wounded in the head by shrapnel, and returned to England. This time, instead of the lightning push he tried the long, slow bombardment. ('Persevere' was his family's motto.) It succeeded, and they were married on 4 December 1915 in the Guards' chapel, with three little Churchill children as attendants.

Nellie's sister Clementine had had her doubts about the engagement. She wrote to her husband:

I don't believe she loves him at all but is simply marrying him out of pity... She vacillated (for the last week) between breaking off entirely, postponement, and immediate marriage... but now she has hardened into a sort of mule-like obstinacy & says with a drawn wretched face that she loves him, is divinely happy & will marry him on [December] the 4th.<sup>8</sup>

After the wedding, however, she felt differently: 'Nellie was married on Saturday – I feel much happier now about her, as from several people I have heard good reports of Bertram...'<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Soames, *Clementine Churchill*, p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.



*Nellie Hozier Romilly*

## TWO

*His father's side: The Romillys*

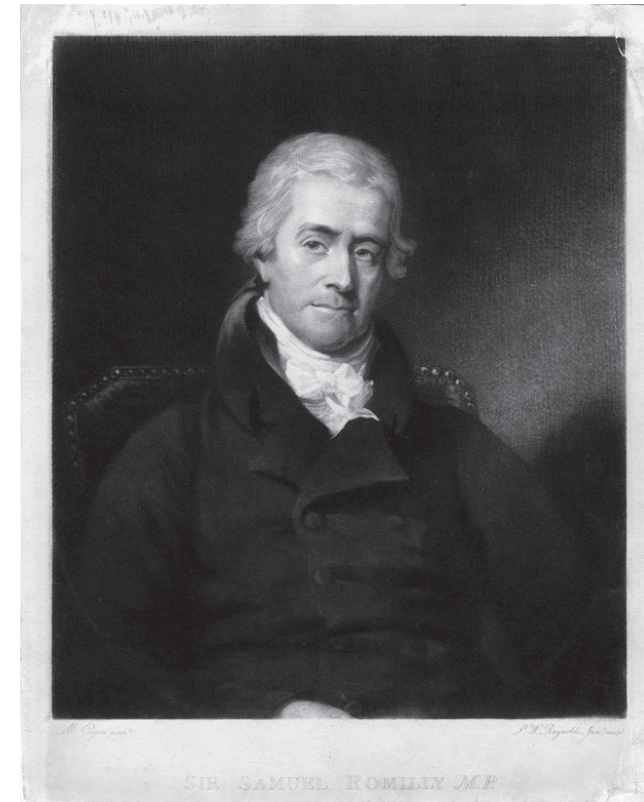
'I sit down to write my life; the life of one who never achieved any thing memorable, who will probably leave no posterity, and the memory of whom is therefore likely to survive him only till the last a few remaining and affectionate friends shall have followed him to the grave.'

These are the opening words of Sir Samuel Romilly's memoirs,<sup>10</sup> and perhaps when he wrote them he was being genuinely modest, or had his tongue in his cheek, for he did leave a great posterity, and he is still remembered as the reforming legist who helped abolish slavery.

He was the son of Étienne Romilly, a Huguenot (French Protestant) who fled Montpellier, where his family had a 'pretty good landed estate', when the revocation of the Edict of Nantes declared open season on Protestants, and set up business in London as a wax bleacher. Étienne married Judith Monsallier, daughter of another French refugee, by whom he had eight children. Their son Peter, born 1722, was apprenticed to a jeweller, and married Margaret Garnault, the sister of a fellow apprentice. Only three of their children survived – Thomas, Catherine and Samuel, who became the great reforming lawyer and parliamentarian and, for the sake of clarity in this book, 'our' Samuel.

Born in Frith Street, Soho on 1 March 1757, our Samuel was a good classical scholar and, because of his French background, particularly knowledgeable about French literature. Not keen to work in his father's jewellery business, he took every chance to read and improve on his basic education – tried writing poetry, and gave up when he realised he had little talent – read every Latin author he could get his hands on. The family was happy, but never well-off until a French relation, a M. de la Haize, died leaving them some fourteen or fifteen thousand pounds – an incredible fortune, worth several million in today's money. Samuel and his brother each received two thousand pounds, enabling Samuel, at sixteen, to quit his

<sup>10</sup> *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, written by himself; with a selection from his correspondence. Edited by his sons.* Published by John Murray, London, 1860.



*Sir Samuel Romilly*

father's business and be articled to one of the Six Clerks in Chancery. The work interested but did not satisfy him, and at twenty-one he used his legacy to buy himself a place in Gray's Inn to study law. In 1781 he went to Geneva, where he met such influential democratic leaders as Étienne Louis Dumont and the Comte de Mirabeau. In 1783 he was called to the Bar, and divided his time between the Midlands circuit and Chancery practice.

His sister Catherine had married his great friend John Roget of Geneva, whose son was the Roget of *Roget's Thesaurus* (one of whose editors is Samuel Romilly Roget.) In 1783, when Catherine was widowed with two small children, Samuel travelled to Geneva to bring them home. This was not his first journey on behalf of the Rogets: earlier, taking their son to Geneva, he travelled 'at a time of war' through the Low Countries, made his way to Paris

in time to witness the sullen public celebrations of the Dauphin's birth, saw and assisted at various criminal trials in Switzerland, then returned to England to continue his studies and to write an article for the *Morning Chronicle* on 'late public events at Geneva'. At this time he was 'filled... with horror at West Indian slavery and the Slave Trade', and tried without success to publish his translation of an anti-slavery tract by the Marquis de Condorcet.

In 1788 he was back in Paris, mingling with the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, the Marquis de Lafayette, Thomas Jefferson, and the lawyer and royal administrator de Malesherbes, who in 1794 was beheaded for defending Louis XVI at his trial. Romilly was 'among those who, in the early stages of the French Revolution, entertained the most sanguine expectations of the happy effects which were to result from it, not to France alone, but to the rest of the world.' He was so keen that in 1789 he published a pamphlet called *Thoughts on the probable influence of the French Revolution on Great Britain*, and a collection of 'letters' from a fictional German traveller: *Letters containing an account of the late revolution in France, and observations on the laws, manners and institutions of the English, written during the author's residence at Paris, Versailles and London in the years 1789-90*. Later he burnt all the surviving copies of this book, because

I left [Paris] with a much less favourable opinion of the state of public affairs than that which I had entertained when I arrived there. I found the most exaggerated and extravagant notions of liberty entertained by many, and the most violent and bitter animosities prevailing, and all that disposition to violence on the part of the lower orders of the people, which, a few days afterwards, manifested itself in the insurrection that ended in bringing the Royal family to Paris.

In a not dissimilar way, his descendant Esmond lost his first, naïve enthusiasm for communism after service in the Spanish Civil War.

Samuel's first book was *Observations of a Late Publication, intitled, Thoughts on Executive Justice*, published in 1786. This was in response to Martin Madan's book, *Thoughts on Executive Justice with Respect to the Criminal Laws*, advocating the increase of capital punishments; Samuel thought otherwise, and he was to devote much of his life to attempting

to change England's criminal law by repealing old statutes that imposed disproportionately harsh penalties for minor crimes. In his *Memoirs* Sir Samuel rather went to town on Madan, who 'absurdly insisted on the expediency of rigidly enforcing, in every instance, our penal code, sanguinary and barbarous as it is: the certainty of punishment he strongly recommended, but intimated no wish to see any part of its severity relaxed...'

However, the book sold less than a hundred copies. In 1784 Romilly was asked to send a French friend books about the House of Commons law and proceedings; finding that there were no such sources, he wrote one himself. Mirabeau translated it in the hope of using it in revolutionary France but, Romilly disconsolately recorded, 'it never, however, was the smallest use; and no regard whatever was paid to it by the National Assembly... The leading members were little disposed to borrow any thing from England.'

Samuel's chancery practice continued to flourish, and in 1798 he married Anne Garbett, daughter of Francis Garbett of Knill Court, Herefordshire. In 1800 he took silk and in 1805 was appointed Chancellor of the County Palatine of Durham. A Whig, he was rapidly becoming a figure of some power and influence. In 1806 he was made Solicitor-General, was knighted (to his apparent displeasure), and entered Parliament as the Member for Queensborough. Now he could start the great reforming work of his life. He instituted changes to bankruptcy procedures, and was one of the staunchest and most eloquent supporters of Wilberforce's Bill to abolish slavery, which passed on 23 February 1807.

He continued to write on law reform, and his *Observations on the Criminal Law of England* was widely known and admired.

On 29 October 1818 his beloved wife died. Three days later Sir Samuel Romilly killed himself.

Byron mentioned this suicide in *Don Juan*, Canto I:

Some women use their tongues – she look'd a lecture,  
Each eye a sermon, and her brow a homily,  
An all-in-all sufficient self-director,  
Like the lamented late Sir Samuel Romilly,  
The Law's expounder, and the State's corrector,

Whose suicide was almost an anomaly –  
 One sad example more, that ‘All is vanity’  
 (The jury brought their verdict in ‘Insanity’).

Romilly was Byron’s lawyer, but represented Byron’s wife in their divorce. Byron, as the lines above show, was not amused.

Sir Samuel Romilly was very much loved for his sweet nature, his liberal conscience and honesty, his ideals of public service. He liked cats. He adored his wife. He was a patriot. After that lucky inheritance he became a rich man through his own hard work. He had a streak of melancholy that passed down the generations not to Esmond but to his brother Giles. As his biographer Patrick Medd wrote, Sir Samuel ‘never lost sight of the fact that a politician is dealing with ordinary people.’ – something that can be said of very few modern politicians.

He had had seven children: Sophia, William, John, Edward, Henry, Charles and Frederick. John (1802-1874) became an MP and QC and, like his father, was appointed Solicitor-General, then Attorney-General, and in 1851 Master of the Rolls, a position he held until 1873 (he was the last Master of the Rolls to sit in Parliament). In 1866 he was created Baron Romilly, the hereditary title of a Law Lord. He married Caroline Otter, daughter of the Bishop of Chichester.

His brother Charles Romilly married Lady Elizabeth Russell, daughter of the Duke of Bedford. Frederick, the youngest son, began a family tradition by joining the Scots Guards and achieving the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. He was MP for Canterbury from 1850 to 1852. In 1852 he fought what one source says was the last duel in England, although other sources, rather disappointingly, contradict this. He married the Earl of Minto’s daughter, Lady Elizabeth Elliott, in 1848, and had five children: Samuel Henry, born 1849, Frederick William, born 1854, the writer, explorer and administrator Hugh Hastings Romilly – some of whose books about Papua New Guinea have recently been reissued in facsimile by BiblioBazarr LLC, and are well worth reading – and Elizabeth and Gertrude.

**Samuel Henry Romilly** (1849-1940) was Esmond’s grandfather. He inherited his uncle Henry’s entire estate, including the Hereford lands, Huntington Park and the Barry estates in Wales, and although called to the Bar in 1874 spent most of his life in the moneyed ease of a country gentleman. He was JP for Herefordshire and Glamorgan and, like his wife, Lady Arabella, daughter of Earl of Southesk, indulged an interest in literature. They had three daughters and two sons. The second son was Frederick, always known as Eric (1886–1953), who followed father and grandfather into the law. The daughters were Cicely, Dorothea and Constance. The eldest son was **Bertram Henry Samuel** (1878–1940), Esmond’s father, who, as we have seen, married Nellie Hozier in 1915.

In the Churchill Archives is a letter from Nellie Romilly to her brother-in-law Winston Churchill. It is dated 5 February 1916, when Nellie was either still on her honeymoon or on her first married visit to Romilly HQ, and two months pregnant with her first child, Giles. On paper headed HUNTINGTON PARK, KINGTON, HEREFORDSHIRE, Nellie’s large, looping writing tells ‘Dearest Winston’ that

Here I am on my best behaviour visiting the ancestral home of the Romilly’s and trying to soften my father-in-law’s heart ... Bertram is having posted to you a ginger cake made here, it is rather a good receipt [recipe] & used to be sent to him when he was in France.

We are now waiting for Bertram’s medical board on Feb 14, the result of which we have not the vaguest idea. I think the best thing would be light duty in London and a small flat there, as I should be rather nervous of his going to the Sudan in the very hot weather.

I was amused to read this in Yesterday’s Daily Mail ‘American Schoolboy’s Howlers’. Who is Prime Minister of England. Unanimous reply. ‘Winston Churchill’. Well I wish it were the truth and I’m sure many others do too ... Keep well & strong & safe & come back soon.

Your V affec.

Nellie R

I am still very happy & no quarrels.



No quarrels? With whom? Or, rather, not with whom? Probably that must remain a mystery. Colonel Romilly's health was a matter of real concern, for his head injury had been severe, necessitating the insertion of a metal plate in his skull. (Colonel Romilly's niece remembered him telling her that Queen Mary once asked to feel this plate.)

In February 1916 Churchill, out of the Cabinet and out of political favour after the fiasco of Gallipoli, had re-joined his regiment and was in the front lines in France. No doubt he appreciated the ginger cake. Nellie's encouraging comments about his being PM were intended to show her solidarity and affection for him in what amounted almost to a period of political disgrace. Perhaps he was also pulling strings to ensure that Bertram Romilly was given a suitable posting that would not impose too much strain on him after the head wound he had already sustained. But why was Nellie 'on her best behaviour', and why did her father-in-law's heart have to be softened? Perhaps it was about money, of which Nellie and Bertram had little. Nellie's gambling caused many money troubles over the years. Churchill was often ready to help out, sometimes by covering Nellie's rubber cheques, at least until Bertram Romilly put his foot down about it.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of a 'small flat' in London the Romillys bought a smart little house, 15 Pimlico Road, which remained in the family's possession until after Giles's death in 1967. It is still there, one of a sudden little terrace of three redbrick houses in among the porticos and white stucco of the area, a short stroll from Sloane Square and Buckingham Palace.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, the letter of 6th October 1931 from Nellie's bank manager to Churchill, saying that Bertram Romilly had forbidden any loans or guarantees of an overdraft to Nellie without his express permission. Reference: CHAR 28/145 The Sir Winston Churchill Archive Trust.

## THREE

*Childhood – The Red Rose and the White*

The world wasn't quite ready for Esmond. In June 1918 the King of the Belgians wrote to Nellie Romilly telling her that she had been awarded the *Médaille de la Reine Elisabeth* for her 1914 work in Belgium. This letter, which Nellie proudly kept in one of her scrapbooks, had to be forwarded from her Pimlico address to Dieppe, and it's puzzling that a woman nearly eight months pregnant should have travelled to France in wartime conditions. Whatever the reason, it may have been this travelling that brought on Esmond's early birth. On 10 July 1918 Nellie's sister Clementine wrote to her mother-in-law, Lady Randolph Churchill:

Nellie had a beautiful son this morning. But something went wrong with the chloroform apparatus & it was born absolutely without it... [The baby] came a fortnight too soon so nothing was ready, layette cradle and all were at Lullenden [their country home], I brought everything up this morning and found the poor midget 'wrapped in swaddling clothes'...<sup>12</sup>

Nellie registered the new baby's birth herself, and as the birth certificate below shows, she gave him the names Esmond Samuel David. 'Samuel' was of course a traditional Romilly name, and already used as Giles's second name, but somehow it disappeared from Esmond's name, for in every document except his birth certificate he is Esmond Mark/Marcus David. Calling him David may have been in honour of David Mitford (since 1916 the 2nd Lord Redesdale), Nellie's first cousin and putative half-brother, and later Esmond's father-in-law.

The choice of two unusual first names for their sons shows that the Romillys were eager to give the boys their own identities. However, the fact that Giles was given two emphatically Romilly names and Esmond none cues a discussion of the rumour that Bertram Romilly was not his father – that

<sup>12</sup> CHAR 28/128. © The Sir Winston Churchill Archive Trust.