In all the other chapters of this book, the attempt has been made to deal, however briefly, with the main political events in the entire careers of the personalities discussed. In the case of Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill (1874–1965) this has proved impracticable – so long and varied was his career, and so many and great its vicissitudes, that
such an approach would have been unrealistic within the tight space constraints of this volume. It has, accordingly, been decided to concentrate almost wholly on his wartime premiership, from 1940–45, and in particular on his contribution during the fateful year of 1940.

It is, however, necessary to consider the early circumstances of Churchill’s life to understand the character of the man who became Prime Minister on 10 May 1940, at the age of 65. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill, a younger son of the 7th Duke of Marlborough, was a highly unstable figure and a demagogic politician, who became a youthful Chancellor of the Exchequer, only to resign from the post in a fit of pique after five months, in December 1886, dying nine years later at the age of 45 from syphilis. Lord Randolph was married to Jennie Jerome, the beautiful daughter of an American millionaire, whose fortune, sadly, proved to be insecurely based. A woman of easy virtue, who was to run through three husbands and a reputed 200 lovers, she was a glamorous but necessarily remote figure in the life of the young Winston, who was grievously neglected by both his parents.

This did not prevent him from idolising them. He doted on his mother from afar, and – as a young man – wrote a highly readable but unjustifiably laudatory biography of Lord Randolph. From his parents he inherited extravagant tastes, but not the financial means to support them – a gap he was largely able to fill by his amazing productivity as a journalist and author. An under-educated man, who was an indifferent pupil at his public school (Harrow), he nevertheless emerged with a deep love and knowledge of the English language, modelling his own style on the great rolling passages of the works of the historians Gibbon and Macaulay.

He also learnt early on that if he was to fan the flickering interest of his absent parents he must seize every opportunity to attract attention to himself. He grew up to be an exceptionally brash young man – a show-off, but one who was prepared to work diligently to obtain his objectives. He also became oblivious to personal danger, rushing round the world from one trouble spot to another in his search for glory and renown as a soldier and part-time journalist. This took him from Cuba to Sudan, the North-West Frontier and South Africa (where he escaped after being captured by the Boers) in the five years from 1895 to 1900, when he was elected for the first time as Tory MP for Oldham, at the age of 25.

The young Churchill had a pugnacious nature, but also a deeply romantic temperament. An ardent patriot, strongly committed to the British Empire, then straddling a quarter of the globe, he looked for inspiration to his warrior ancestor, John Churchill, the 1st Duke of