

Julia Llewellyn Smith meets an octogenarian who might once have become Prime Minister

Rebel without a pause

TONY WHITE

Somerset de Chair is stinking rich. This 83-year-old author, former MP and war hero, lives in the kind of houses that most of us pay £5 to gape at on Bank Holiday Mondays. When you visit him at one of them, Bourne Park, near Canterbury, the chauffeur picks you up in a Jaguar and drives you through rippling countryside, through colossal gates, across a humpback bridge and up to a perfectly-proportioned, Queen-Anne mansion.

In the hall, Van Dycks are dripping from the walls, a 15th-century triptych of the Adoration of the Magi stands in pride of place. It is mid-morning and de Chair is sitting in an anteroom, taking alternate sips of coffee and gin and tonic. Outside, the swimming pool is hibernating under tarpaulin. Inside, the temperature is positively subtropical. Heating bills are not an issue for the de Chairs.

"How big is the house?" I ask, as I help him to hobble through the cavernous rooms, past the Stubbsses and the De Hoochs and his world-famous jade collection. "Oh, not as big," he replies perkily. "There are only 15 bedrooms."

If this man had not existed, Evelyn Waugh would have invented him. In the racy, pacy 1930s, he was the brightest of the bright young things: buoyed by inherited wealth, gliding between Oxford and London in his open-top Rolls and accumulating stately homes and beautiful wives in equal measure.

There was substance, however, to de Chair's blonde-haired, blue-eyed style. He wrote his first book *The Impending Storm* at the age of 20, and by 24, at the height of the abdication crisis, he was MP for South West Norfolk. During the war, he was one of the two officers to accept the surrender of Baghdad and was wounded at the Battle of Palmyra. "Would you like to see what the Vichy French did to me?" he inquires, rolling up his trouser leg to reveal swollen flesh and a hole as big as a marble.

Before the war, he visited Mussolini; after it, he lunched with Churchill. He produced three novels and three collections of poetry. His account of the Iraqi campaign, *The Golden Ca*, was regularly compared with the work of T.E. Lawrence. He wrote a biography of Getty and edited Napoleon's memoirs.

No wonder, then, that de Chair's publishers decided to subtitle *Morning Glory*, the first part of this eminent man's autobiography, *Memoirs from the Edge of History*.

The author, however, is horrified by their choice. "Rather pompous, don't you think," he says. "I wanted them to call it *The Indiscretions of a Self-Confessed Heterosexual*. But the publishers said 'Oh no! We couldn't possibly'."

Well actually, they could. For these rambling memoirs, packed as they are with fascinating historical detail, still linger in the memory as the remarkably frank confessions of a man who has been married four times and admits: "I love women — all women."

Thus, de Chair's memories of his childhood in Australia, where his father was the Governor General of New South Wales; of his time at



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Oxford; of his trip to America where he visited Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks at "Pickfair"; of his days in the Commons under Baldwin, are all permeated with glowing evocations of women in their infinite variety.

On the very first page, the three-year-old Somerset is playing "tents" in the bed of his headmistress's daughter. He was nearly 19 when he lost his virginity in the vac from Oxford to a middle-aged Norwegian maid in New York. From then there was no stopping him. De Chair's second year at Oxford involved twice-weekly visits to the "extraordinarily good-looking" tarts of Bond Street, who charged only £3 a go.

De Chair was not interested only in professionals, however. Long passages are devoted to dalliances with older women, almost literally under the nose of his first wife, the straight-laced Thelma, who, unfortunately for de Chair, lacked the tolerance of her successors.

After 18 years of marriage, Thelma had her revenge. "She was on the London County Council and I was a

parliamentary candidate for South Paddington. It would have been all right," says de Chair, snorting helplessly at the memory. "but for the fact I had rented a house in Belgravia for me and Carmen, the girl I was passionately in love with, who had been pregnant since April."

The house was taken in the name of Appleton — somewhat confusing the landlady, who was confronted everywhere by election posters of de Chair. "She went to my wife and said: 'I want you to be the first to know.' These women who want you to be the first to know are dangerous."

Thelma employed a firm of private detectives and collected the evidence to hit de Chair with a divorce suit. He was forced to stand down. *Plus ça change*. "I don't think it was necessary at all. It didn't interfere with my public duties. I saw Winston [Churchill] in the smoking room and his

De Chair gave up his political career for a woman who bolted

voice boomed out: 'What is the charge? Adultery?' Then he said: 'Are you thinking of marrying the other party? Is she a Conservative? So what's the problem? I said my wife was a member of the executive committee and his aquamarine eyes bulged. He said: 'Surely you don't attend the local committee?'

But de Chair had to go and to make matters worse, Carmen shortly bolted with the naval officer who was navigating *Harebell*, her husband's 56-ton yacht. "It was rather disillusioning, since this was the woman I had given up my entire political career for," he snorts indignantly.

So then there was Tessa, the model, followed in 1974 by his current wife, the beautiful Lady Juliet, 59, the former wife of the Marquess of Bristol and the only daughter of Earl Fitzwilliam.

They lived at St Osyth's Priory, a

fairytale medieval pile in Essex, but then Juliet inherited a £20 million art collection. "It's astonishing really. There are seven Stubbsses, six Van Dycks."

So far, so good, but when the 48 Hepplewhite chairs arrived, space ran out. "It was all too much, a lot of her ancestors seemed to be 7ft tall; we needed great, high rooms to put them in." So they bought Bourne Park and now divide their time between there, Essex and their farm in New York State. Their daughter, Helena, (de Chair has five more) is 17 and is plainly adored.

Today, de Chair is balding and lame, a jowly shadow, in his elegant suit, of his *Morning Glory* self. But the roguish irreverence still sparkles, the laughter is as irrepressible as ever. "I fully expected to become Prime Minister," he says. "But I've always been in trouble. I've been a rebel without a pause. I'm not a team player. All the same, I do feel pretty relaxed and happy. Everything seems to have turned out pretty well."

● *Morning Glory* is published by Cassell, £20