

Lord Beaverbrook

As a teenager, I met Lord Beaverbrook (1879-1964), my great-uncle. The first question he asked me was 'Are you the sort of boy who likes to stir up mischief?'

When I replied, 'Yes, sometimes,' he cackled and replied, 'Wal, I was a mischief-maker when I was your age. Still am!'

Even in his eighties, when I knew him well, Uncle Max was a firecracker of energy, journalistic crusading, political intriguing and boisterous trouble-stirring.

He loved dramas. He used the fortune he made as a financier to enjoy life to the full – deal-making, art-collecting, party-giving and wooing many mistresses. But when it came to his own newspapers and to politics, he was *un homme sérieux*.

Beaverbrook was Winston Churchill's closest friend and occasional rival. They were the only two politicians to serve in the War Cabinets of both World Wars.

The historian Robert Blake once told me, 'We would have lost the First World War in 1916 if Beaverbrook had not brought Asquith down. We would have lost the Second World War in 1940 if Beaverbrook had not got the Spitfires up.'

In a cloakroom at Cherkley Court,

Uncle Max's Surrey house, three posters hung on the walls with these slogans:

Committees take the punch out of War Organisation is the enemy of improvisation

I always dispute the umpire's decision

These mementos of the period Churchill later described as 'Max's finest hour' produced many stories about Uncle Max's time as Minister of Aircraft Production.

'I had to fight the brass hats and the bowler hats of the Air Ministry 24 hours a day,' he told me. 'When I halted bomber production to concentrate on fighter production, all the air marshals except Dowding hated me. They hated me even more when I seized control from the RAF of all spares. I sent raiding parties to aerodromes to break the padlocks on hangers stuffed so full of spare air frames and spare engines that I called them my pots of gold.'

'I gave big contracts to small

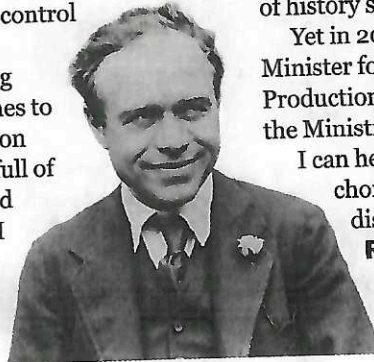
factories, against industrial policy. I bought planes from America, against Foreign Office policy. I cannibalised damaged aircraft, against Air Ministry policy. I made civil servants work seven days a week, against Whitehall policy. "No one knows the trouble I see," I used to tell Winston, but he called it a miracle when I doubled the number of fighters coming into the front line for the Battle of Britain [marking its 80th anniversary this summer].'

In old age, Uncle Max grumbled that he'd be remembered only for his books; that his achievements as a wartime Cabinet Minister would be completely forgotten. He was almost right. The umpire of history seemed to have given him out.

Yet in 2020 the media is demanding a Minister for Medical Equipment Production, with Beaverbrook's drive, at the Ministry of Aircraft Production.

I can hear a familiar Canadian accent chortling, 'Didn't I tell ya? I always dispute the umpire's decision!'

Reverend Jonathan Aitken



Beaverbrook – Aitken's great-uncle – in 1928

MEMORY LANE

On 4th December 1949, I was eight years old and shopping for summer pyjamas with my mother, younger sister and brother. This was strange and exotic in icy Knightsbridge, but I was very excited; we were about to get on a ship to join my father, Duncan Stewart, 45, the new Governor of Sarawak, North Borneo. He had been in Palestine in his last job and we'd hardly seen him. He was heroic, charismatic, much loved and not often around.

On that same day, his 19th in the post, he was inspecting the guard of honour during the ceremonies to welcome him in Sibuan province, when

suddenly a young Malay separatist stepped forward and stabbed him. His white glove turning red with blood, he stumbled and collapsed; years later, I learnt that he asked for the ceremony to proceed without fuss. After an emergency operation in Sibuan Hospital, he was taken to Singapore General Hospital.

At the time I knew little of this. We were told that he'd been hurt, and that my mother had flown to be at his



Last post: Stewart in 1949

bedside. Photographs of her and us three blond-haired children appeared daily in the press in Singapore and London for the six days he fought for his life.

Back in England, my grandmother, breakfasting in bed, summoned the three of us and told us that his injuries were so severe that 'God decided to take him to Him'. I stared at the sloping wooden floor of the bedroom. For years afterwards, I believed there were two sorts of death – ordinary ones, and the ones where God decided to relieve someone from unbearable suffering.

He was given a state funeral and buried in Singapore. We never talked about his assassination, but our lives changed for ever. Later we had to sell Castle

Stalker, the ruined island castle my father had vowed to restore when he retired.

In 2000, 50 years after his burial, Bidadari Cemetery was demolished to make way for housing. I watched, stunned, as a gravedigger dug up his remains – visible pieces of the father I'd longed for all those years. They were flown back to Scotland. In a graveside ceremony on a blustery July day, his children, grandchildren and two little great-grandchildren reburied him within sight of his beloved Scottish home.

By Kirsteen Stewart, author of *Break These Chains* (out now), who receives £50

Readers are invited to send in their own 400-word submissions about the past