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The Mask Of Command

John Keegan

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About the Author

John Keegan is the Defence Editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and Britain's foremost military historian. The Reith Lecturer in 1998, he is the author of many bestselling books including *The Face of Battle, Six Armies in Normandy, Battle at Sea, The Second World War, A History of Warfare* (awarded the Duff Cooper Prize), *Warpaths, The Battle for History, The First World War*, and most recently, *Intelligence in War*.

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Illustrations

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To Susanne

THE MASK OF COMMAND

A Study of Generalship

JOHN KEEGAN

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INTRODUCTION

Pre-Heroic Leadership

This book is about generals, who they are, what they do, and how what they do affects the world in which men and women live. It might be expected to proceed by one or other method favoured by those who have approached the subject before: the ‘traits’ method or the ‘behaviour’ method. The first takes as its premise the assumption that those who exercise military authority will reveal under examination a certain set of common characteristics. The second attempts to identify patterns of behaviour which distinguish leader from follower. ‘Trait’ studies deal in the qualities of energy, decisiveness and self-confidence. ‘Behaviour’ studies explore roles; roles of encouragement, dissuasion and coercion.

Both are the methods of social scientists and, as with all social science, condemn those who practise them to the agony of making universal and general what is stubbornly local and particular. I am an historian, not a social scientist, and am therefore free to believe that the generalship of one age and place may not at all resemble that of another. Not only am I free thus to believe; I actually do so, and all the more certainly after thirty years’ practice of my trade. Commonality of traits and behaviour I certainly see in commanders of all periods and places. But even more

strongly do I perceive that the warfare of any one society may differ so sharply from that of another that commonality of trait and behaviour in those who direct it is overlaid altogether in importance by differences in the purposes they serve and the functions they perform.

For the general – the word itself is pregnant with ambiguity – may be many things besides the commander of an army, though he will certainly be that. He may be king or priest: Alexander the Great was both. He may be diplomat: in their different ways Marlborough and Eisenhower excelled as much at conciliation as at strategy. He may be thinker rather than doer: Moltke the Elder's qualities were intellectual rather than executive. He may command by surrogate authority of a monarch, as Wellington did, or by endorsement of a democratic assembly, which gave Grant his powers. He may be owed obedience only for as long as his decisions bring victory, the uneasy lot of generals in the Boer free states. He may be demagogue-turned-tyrant, and yet sustain his military authority, as Hitler did almost until five minutes past midnight.

Generalship is, in short, much more than command of armies in the field. For an army is, to resort to cliché, an expression of the society from which it issues. The purposes for which it fights and the way it does so will therefore be determined in large measure by what a society wants from a war and how far it expects its army to go in delivering that outcome. A general may, given strong character traits and effective behaviour, carry both society and army farther than they believed they wished to travel. But he too, even if, like Alexander, he both rules and commands, will in the last resort act as a man of his time and place: when Alexander learnt in India that his army yearned for Greece more strongly than for new worlds to conquer, he managed an appearance of good grace and turned his steps homeward.

In ignoring the particularity of leadership, social scientists have been encouraged by unlikely allies, the strategic theorists. Social science conceives itself as a benign discipline, one of whose purposes is to rob strategy of point by reasoning the causes of struggle away. But strategic theorists are, in their way, social scientists also. For their aim – and the aim is a recent one, since strategic theory in its pure form was unknown before the eighteenth century – is to reduce the chaotic phenomena of warfare to a system of essentials sufficiently few for an ordered mind to bend to its purpose. The process of its development has been akin to that of economics. Just as modern economists have learnt to perceive that the aims of the mercantilists – who perceived trade as a form of piecemeal conquest – were misconceived, so too have modern strategists come to teach that the methods and aspirations of earlier practitioners were rooted in false perception.

Ironically, economics and strategy have moved in exactly contrary directions. Modern economists preach moderation: all grow richer, they argue, when none seeks advantage. Modern strategists teach exactly the opposite. There is no place, they insist, for moderation in warfare, of the sort that seemed to suffuse the warfare of cabinets and kings. Its only justification is victory, and victory is won by methods of extreme ruthlessness – decision, concentration, offensive action. These are ‘the principles of war’ which we owe to the greatest of the strategic theorists, Karl von Clausewitz, who began to publish at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The chronology of strategic theory-making is of acute significance. Clausewitz, like Marx, is commonly portrayed as free-floating in time, simply a mind more powerful than any which had applied itself to its chosen subject before. Rarely is either subjected to the rigour of contextualization. Yet context, when theories as powerful as theirs are at stake, is all. Marx was able to argue for the primacy of

ownership of the means of production as a determinant of social relationships largely because, at the time when he wrote, finance and investment overshadowed all other forces in society, and the military class – exhausted by the Napoleonic wars and dispirited by the defeat of its interests in Russia in 1825 and in France in 1830 – was at an unnaturally low ebb of self-confidence. Yet military power, represented in its crudest form by the robber-baron principle, can, of course, at any time it chooses, make fools of the financier and investor, as the history of investment in unstable areas of the world makes unarguably evident. It can equally make fools of revolutionary leaders who put their trust in the force of 'historical' laws. Marx, in his heart, recognized both truths, feared more than any other the temperament – and the military class is ultimately self-choosing by temperament rather than material interest – that will seize arms simply for the pleasure that blood-letting gives, and constantly urged the politically conscious to learn the habits and discipline of the military class as the merest means of defending and furthering the revolution.

Clausewitz also belongs in context, though he is rarely put there. His famous 'principles of war' – written originally as a school text for the Prussian Crown Prince – are, in a sense, words to the unwise. It is inconceivable that Alexander or Caesar or Frederick the Great or even Wellington should have needed to be reminded that a general should husband his resources and expend them only for good purpose – which is what the principles of 'decision', 'concentration' and 'offensive action' counsel. It is even less conceivable that any should have needed reminding, from Clausewitz's later work, that 'war is the continuation of policy by other means'. Alexander, Caesar, Frederick, even Wellington – who had sat as a member of parliament and minister – inhaled war and politics in the same breath. All accepted without conscious reflection the interrelationship of force and persuasion; all understood

the limits to which the exercise of force may be usefully pushed; all lived with the reality that there is only so much moral sacrifice to be extracted from peoples, only so much material sacrifice from their economic lives.

The great texts of strategic theory that began to appear at the beginning of the nineteenth century, of which Clausewitz's *On War* is incomparably the most incisive, as well as the most influential, must therefore be seen as products of their time and place. Clausewitz is often called 'the interpreter of Napoleon'. But that description misleads because it is entirely circular: Napoleon, though achieving power rather than being born or thrust into it, both ruled and commanded, and in almost exactly the same way and for the same purposes as Alexander had done. He, too, knew that war is an extension of policy by other means and his emperorship was a sustained exercise in that duality. Clausewitz, who might as well be characterized as 'the interpreter of Alexander' or of Caesar, Wallenstein, Frederick the Great or any other statesman-general, was clearly not writing for his or for their like. On the contrary: he was writing for a new class of warrior, whose upbringing and way of life distanced its members from the realities of politics by deliberate purpose.

This class was the product of a division of labour in societies that were rapidly complexifying. Europe, almost until the end of the *ancien régime*, remained a society in which the ruling class was also a military class. The sword, accoutrement *de rigueur* of anyone pretending to the title of gentleman, was the outward symbol of that identification. But the growing wealth of *ancien régime* states produced classes – mercantile, legal, academic – that would not tolerate their exclusion from politics simply because of their swordless status. The Revolution was indeed, in one of its aspects, a revolt by the swordless against the swordbearers, and its success in that respect was unmistakable. Power did pass, as a result of the events

of 1789, from those who held wealth as a result of ancestral feats of arms to those who produced, extracted, manipulated or lent it. In that strict but narrow sense, Marx's observation was an exact one. But the separation of the military from the ruling class and the diminution of its influence did not entail its extinction. On the contrary: military class merely ramified, and in two contrary directions. Following the first, military *status* migrated from the few to the many. 'Every man a soldier' had been one of the principal slogans of the Revolution, and one of the most powerful for all that it was unspoken. Following the second, military *command* devolved from amateurs to professionals. The old swordbearing class, which had justified its social primacy by its availability to lead in battle, gave up its monopoly of military leadership to a new class, drawn partly but not exclusively from it, whose sole purpose was officer-ship.

These developments were not contradictory but complementary. Political liberation logically required that all citizens should bear an equal share of the state's military burdens. The enormous armies that universal service produced came to require by extension that they should be commanded by men whose business was war. The Revolution, however, had taught anyone connected with politics, whether in old monarchies or new republics, that professional soldiers in command of mass armies were not merely *a* menace but *the* principal menace to the stability of government. Napoleon's career – he, as a professional artilleryman, was an early member of the new officer class – was dramatic evidence of that danger, and the word coined to denote it, Bonapartism, was taken from his name.

If the new military class was not to hold governments under permanent threat of blackmail, displacement or supplantation – Professor Samuel Finer's famous categorization of the levels at which soldiers intervene in

politics – it must, then, both be excluded from politics and denied political skills. The military academies which sprang up all over the Western world contemporaneously with the Revolution were dedicated to that end. Not only did they raise their inmates in monastic isolation from public life; they also sought to inculcate the belief – with very large success, it must be said – that politics is none of a soldier's business.

But that, of course, is a nonsense, as the most famous of Clausewitz's dicta points out. War is indeed an extension of politics and, if it is to be fought in a manner that serves political ends, soldiers must understand how the two interact. The Romans, masters in the exercise of power, had grasped the necessity and designed a training *cursus* which made its products adepts of both worlds. Nineteenth-century Europe, by saddling itself with armies and electorates far larger than republican Rome had thought constitutionally safe, denied itself the *cursus* solution. It sought instead to educate soldiers in the means by which war may serve politics, without risking sullying the soldier's mind by political theory or political fact.

The many books which imitated Clausewitz's *On War* are the classroom texts of that syllabus. And very strange, distorted and partial texts they are as a result. For, if soldiers were to be forbidden all part in the calculations of foreign or domestic policy, then they had to be taught a method of war-making into which calculation of the political effects of their doings came not at all. It was enough that they should know that war had political purpose and that wars which exceeded in cost the value that victory might bring were not politically worth fighting. That being the case, the texts on which pupil officers have been raised since the mid-nineteenth century – roughly the date when Clausewitzian ideas began to circulate – have preached a form of warfare that makes no room for political or diplomatic calculation at all. The commander's

purpose, they have been taught, is to deliver victory by the quickest and cheapest means he can find, leaving it to statesmen to decide what ‘cheapness’ means in that context and how victory is to be used once it has been won.

Strategy, by this teaching, becomes a crude form of economic theory – investment in, earnings out – or little more than asset-stripping by force. Like asset-stripping, it works, at least in the sense that it produces returns. But, as those who follow in the wake of asset-strippers know to their cost, the returns of the technique benefit the few rather than the many. For there is life after asset-stripping, communities that must be remade, confidences that must be re-established, trading relationships that must be rebuilt, credits that must be rewon, currencies that must be coaxed to recirculate. It would not be possible to construct a general economic theory drawn from examples of asset-stripping, any more than from examples of gold rushes, South Sea Bubbles or the great Wall Street Crash.

Yet the strategic theory distilled from Clausewitz – not directly taught by him, for his was a mind too subtle to topple into exactitudes – depends exclusively on the military equivalents of such examples. Take up any military academy text of the last 150 years, and the illustrations of principle on which it draws will be found to come almost without exception from epics of triumph or disaster – the conquest of Gaul, the First Crusade, Marlborough’s Bavarian campaign, Frederick the Great’s manoeuvres before Rossbach and Leuthen, Napoleon’s invasion of Italy, the retreat from Moscow, Waterloo, Gettysburg, the Franco-Prussian War, the 1940 Blitzkrieg and Pearl Harbor. Yet the reality of warfare is no more wholly conveyed by such episodes than the reality of economics is conveyed by the World Slump of 1929–31 or the reality of politics by the Watergate scandal.

For enormous periods of time, even in Western Europe, crucible of the conquering impulse, warfare was not

triumphalist but a cautious, local, piecemeal, protracted and indecisive business. The urge to fortify, defend and deflect in that continent, and even more so in others, was quite as strong as that to campaign, make expeditions or win victories. Indeed, if it were possible to quantify in military history – no doubt it is, but few have made the effort – it would probably be revealed that altogether more money and human labour has been expended, over the whole period of collective military effort before the two world wars, in fortification than in fighting. And to no bad purpose: deprecated though it has been by military academy orthodoxies, fortification has served communities well, whenever its works have been kept in order and modernized to meet improvements in weapon manufacture and management. In that perspective, President Reagan's urge to realize a Strategic Defence Initiative, and so protect his United States against the threat of wholesale ballistic missile attack, belongs not to some Utopian dream of the future but to one of the deepest and oldest of all human responses to military danger.

The phenomenon of the conqueror – Alexander, Caesar, Genghis, Napoleon, Hitler – cannot, however, be wished away simply because conquest is an exceptional result of the use of military force. 'Strategy', as we have come to understand the word, may well have been given far too wide a meaning. I am increasingly tempted towards the belief that there is no such thing as 'strategy' at all, and that international relations and military affairs would prove more manageable callings if it could be banished from their vocabularies. Certainly, if 'strategy' means what military academies have taught these last 150 years, it is a crippled concept of distorting effect. But even if 'strategist' is wrongly equated with 'conqueror' and 'conqueror' with 'general', Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon cannot be dematerialized. Not only did they exist in their time and do what they did; generations of commanders have sought to

emulate their achievements and will continue to do so. The critical questions that pose themselves, therefore, are whether there is an alternative style of leadership to that which they practised, dedicated to a strategy not of conquest but of security, and, if so, how and why it came to be supplanted?

That such a style of leadership has pertained is certainly the case, though the historian must travel long distances in time and space to discover it. He must travel, for his most important discoveries, into the realms of what ethologists call ‘primitive warfare’, once the norm in inter-communal relations and still to be observed, as a means of resolving conflicts, among a few peoples in remote parts of the world. Primitive warfare should not be idealized. Ritual or game, which some ethologists have conceived it to be, it is now recognized as not. Primitives are almost universally treacherous in inter-communal fighting, and generally kill freely in the raids and ambushes which are their preferred form of warfare, when the penalty of suffering casualties in return is slight. Their warfare when fighting pitched battles is nevertheless commonly characterized by very low levels of lethality. ‘In spite of the huge array of warriors involved,’ explains W.T. Divale in *Warfare in Primitive Societies*, ‘little killing took place. Because of the great distances between warriors and the relative inefficiency of primitive weapons, combined with a young warrior’s agility to dodge arrows, direct hits rarely occurred. In the event that someone was badly wounded or slain, the battle would usually cease for that day.’ Professor Divale’s analysis requires some exegesis. The ‘great distances’ at which warriors fought were produced by their commonly choosing an agreed battle site. The termination of the battle on a wounding or a death was due to the intervention of elders, who stood ready to mediate with their opposite numbers on the other side.

The moderating influence of elders was a critical but also determining influence upon battles of this style. Their presence, and readiness to intervene, was a structural guarantee that fighting would not exceed in cost the price that the engaged parties were prepared to pay in settlement of their differences. ‘Differences’ is, of course, the crux: ethologists are not of one mind at all as to why primitives fight in the first place. Some insist on seeing primitive warfare as ‘cultural’, a channelling of masculine instincts to violence into collective form, as well as an expression of identity by the males who form a particular collectivity. Others regard fighting as a means of competition for scarce resources and point out that, though pitched battles appear to achieve little on the day, the stronger collectivities do, over time, appear to prevail over the weaker, by taking up the territory that they are unable to defend.

Such territories are, nevertheless, separated from each other by recognized no man’s lands, at or in which battles normally take place. Even after the territory of a weaker has been absorbed by a stronger collectivity, no man’s lands are re-established at the new margin. Evidence of respect for no man’s lands also comes to us from the first post-primitive societies of which we have knowledge, the irrigation or ‘hydraulic’ kingdoms of the Middle East and the early city states of Greece. Neighbours established frontier markers, but were careful to see that one frontier did not abut upon another.

At some stage, however, the time came when no man’s lands disappeared and frontiers assumed tripwire function. By that point we may presume that state formation was far advanced, and the mechanisms by which war is made well developed. Competition for Scarce Resources (CSR – a term coined by Professor Ronald Cohen of the University of Florida) would already have led to military specialization in some degree in primitive society; the individualistic display

of primitive pitched battle, in which the participants staged long-range duels on a man-to-man basis, and not necessarily against the same man throughout, must have given way under competitive pressures to more unified effort. Unification predicates leadership, and the organization of hunting parties, which was central to primitive society, provided a model from which leadership could be translated to the battlefield.

Once leadership implanted itself in warmaking, the age of the hero stood close at hand. Clearly, on the primitive battlefield, there could be no heroes because, while heroism is exceptional, primitive warriordom required that all behave identically. Insofar as there was exceptional behaviour of any sort, it was that of the elders – whom we may call ‘pre-heroic’ leaders – standing ready to mediate when levels of violence exceeded accepted norms. Hunting-band leadership, when brought to the battlefield, would have initiated the process of distinguishing some warriors from others, perhaps by the additional degree of risk that such leaders showed themselves willing to bear: ‘proto-heroes’ they might be called. And when the location of battlefields was fixed not in a no man’s land between frontiers but at or beyond them – the inevitable consequence of no man’s lands disappearing – ‘proto-heroic’ leadership would have transformed itself rapidly into leadership of the heroic style: aggressive, invasive, exemplary, risk-taking.

There is considerable intrinsic logic to suggest that this was the manner in which the shift to heroic leadership took place. The abandonment of fixed for encounter battlefields would have precluded the participation of mediatory elders, whose safety could not be assured in hostile territory. Transgression into hostile territory would, moreover, of itself require the direction of a powerful central authority. Empirical evidence supports this scenario. In warfare between early states which had fixed contiguous frontiers

between themselves, the point of battle seems to have been crop-seizing or crop-destruction at times close to harvest; such expeditions would have required narrow timing and quick results, possible only through dynamic direction. In an alternative form of warfare, when nomads travelled long distances to cross frontiers fixed at the boundary between cultivable land and wilderness,[1] leadership would also have been a necessary condition of success. In such circumstances it would have been fostered by the likely mastery of the means of travel – first driven chariots, then ridden horses – that the strong, the brave and the adventurous were likely to display. In either case, whether of short- or long-range warfare, leadership would have been at a premium, and those who possessed the necessary qualities would have achieved or been thrust into it.

To admit such an identification between qualities and function might seem to be to concede an explanation of leadership denied at the outset. It is, however, nonsensical indifferentism to suppose that individual human qualities count for nothing in the way the world works. Clearly they count for a very great deal. But just as pre-heroic society found a way of organizing itself which equalized, even deprecated, differences between individuals in the processes of combat, so too did heroic society work to accentuate and exaggerate the characteristics of those to whom it conceded leadership for war and conquest. What is interesting about heroic leaders – champions of display, of skill-at-arms, of bold speech but, above all, of exemplary risk-taking – is not to show that they possessed unusual qualities, since that may be taken for granted, but to ask how the societies to which they belonged expected such qualities to be presented. Heroic leadership – any leadership – is, like priesthood, statesmanship, even genius, a matter of externals almost as much as of internalities. The exceptional are both shown to and hidden from the mass of humankind, revealed by artifice, presented by

theatre. The theatrical impulse will be strong in the successful politician, teacher, entrepreneur, athlete, or divine, and will be both expected and reinforced by the audiences to which they perform. In no exceptional human being will it be stronger than in the man who must carry forward others to the risk of their lives. What they know of him must be what they hope and require. What they should not know of him must be concealed at all cost. The leader of men in warfare can show himself to his followers only through a mask, a mask that he must make for himself, but a mask made in such form as will mark him to men of his time and place as the leader they want and need. What follows is an attempt, across time and place, to penetrate the mask of command.

1 Professor William McNeill suggests that such expeditions may have originally been excited by the wealth of traders from civilization who visited nomads seeking to exchange goods for metals or animals not found in settled territory.

CHAPTER 1

Alexander the Great and Heroic Leadership

IMAGINE A HIGHLAND Napoleon. Imagine a Bonny Prince Charlie with European ambitions who, having won back Scotland from King George II, sets off at the head of his clans not just to conquer England – a mere preliminary – but to cross the Channel, to meet and beat the French army on the River Somme, then journey south into Spain to besiege and subdue its principal fortresses, return north to challenge the Holy Roman Emperor, twice confront and defeat him at the head of his forces, seize his Crown, burn his capital, bury his corpse and finally depart eastward to cross swords with the Tsar of Russia or the Sultan of Turkey. Imagine all this compressed into, say, the years 1745–56, between the princeling's twenty-second and thirty-third birthdays. Imagine on his death, at the age of thirty-two, the crowns of Europe shared between his followers – Lord George Murray ruling in Madrid, the Duke of Perth in Paris, Lord Elcho in Vienna, John Roy Stewart in Berlin, Cameron of Lochiel in Warsaw, a gaggle of tartaned chieftains braying for whisky in the small courts of south Germany and London garrisoned by a crew of bare-kneed highlanders. Finally, imagine most of the Jacobite empire

enduring into the nineteenth century, parts of it into the twentieth, and its last fragment into the twenty-first.

Or imagine, if you prefer, a George Washington Bolivar, a Founding Father who determines also to be the Liberator of Latin America; who, having endured the long winter of Valley Forge and the setbacks of the middle years of the War of Independence, to exult at last in the capitulation of Yorktown, conceives the ambition of ridding all the Americas of foreign government. Imagine him embarking the Continental Army in the ships of the new-born United States Navy to voyage south, clear Mexico of Spanish troops, garrison the West Indies with Virginians or New Englanders and make a landing on the shores of South America. Then, victorious in Peru, he crosses the Andes, defeats the Spanish army of the east, and expires on the approaches to the empire of Brazil.

Thus is it just possible to grasp how extraordinary was the career of Alexander the Great. The distances and obstacles of either enterprise defeat the imagination – and they have, indeed, no parallel in any reality except that of Alexander's own life. The world has, of course, known conquerors of extraordinary ambition in its time: Attila the Hun whose horsemen rode from Central Asia to the gates of Rome in the fifth century; the Arab successors of Mahomet turned back into Spain by defeat on the banks of the Loire in the eighth century; and the sons of Genghis Khan, whose Mongols menaced Venice and Vienna in the thirteenth. Napoleon, a devotee of the Alexander epic, came close to re-enacting it in the years between Rivoli, 1797, and Moscow, 1812, as again did Hitler, in whom some gobbet of classical learning also nourished an admiration for Alexander. His orgy of victory was, of course, even more telescoped in time than Napoleon's, who in turn gave battle oftener than Alexander ever did. Yet the achievements of none of these earthshakers quite match those of the original. Napoleon and Hitler scarcely ventured beyond

their own continent. Attila, the Arabs and the Mongols broke the boundaries of Asia but only scratched the heartland of Europe. Alexander, by contrast, first made himself master of the Greek world, then translated himself to another, the Persian Empire, and finally ventured into a third in India. At his death in June 323 BC, he had subdued the largest tract of the earth's surface ever to be conquered by a single individual – Genghis Khan's short-lived empire excepted – and ruled as overlord, emperor or king from Mount Olympus to the Himalaya. Who was Alexander and how did he do what he did?

Alexander: the Father of the Man

Alexander, whose birthday probably fell in July 356 BC, was the son of Philip II of Macedon and his wife Olympias; he was not the King's first son, any more than Olympias was the King's first wife. Philip, an intensely physical man in every aspect of his being, had already married three times and fathered three legitimate children. He was later to marry another three times, and the tally of his offspring, legitimate and by-blows, has never been agreed. He took women where he found them, and, as he spent his life on the move and in impressing his will on the world, the women were many and the outcome of his encounters with them unreckoned.

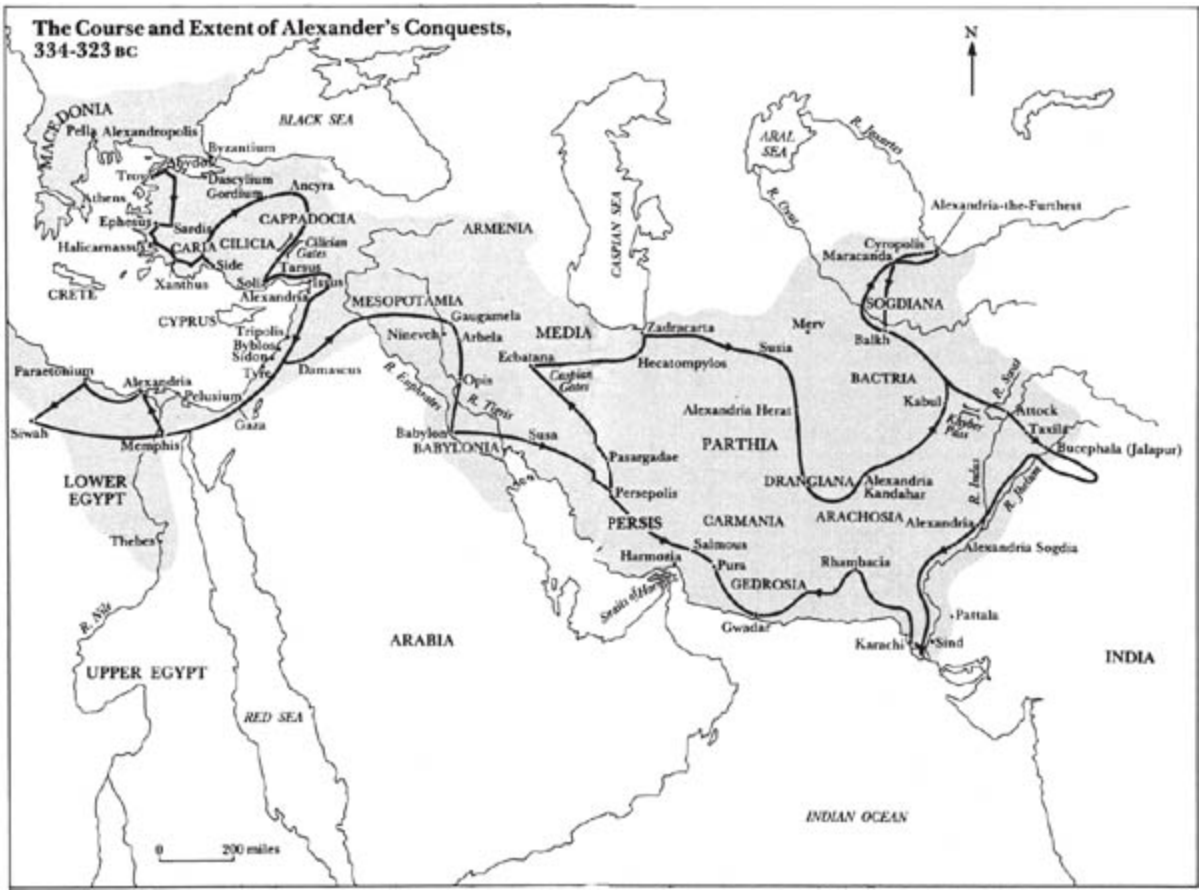
But the marriage with Olympias was a love match, the love contracted at a celebration of certain mysterious and orgiastic religious ceremonies held a year before Alexander's birth on the Aegean island of Samothrace, which no girl of demure character would have attended. Olympias, already divorced, had no demure reputation and would not acquire one as time passed. Though she and Philip were soon to fall out, the attraction between them was probably that of equivalent, rather than

complementary, spirits – wild, carnal and contemptuous of convention. Both were of royal blood and neither, in an age when royalty claimed kinship with the gods, would have thought matchmakers or courtiers necessary intermediaries in what they felt for each other.

Alexander was the immediate outcome of their passion, and perhaps the only one. For war, politics and the death of love quickly drew Philip away from Olympias into whose exclusive care Alexander seems to have fallen in infancy and boyhood. Not until he was twelve or so do we hear of his father taking an interest in the upbringing his son was given. It had run so far the normal course given any young prince of his day: he had been taught to sing and play the lyre, accomplishments that were to be his lifelong pleasures; he had learnt to hunt, and he would hunt bear, lion, birds or foxes every day he was free to do so throughout life; he had been schooled in the rituals of hospitality and as a boy of ten was already noted for the charm and poise with which he received visitors at court; he had, of course, learnt to ride (his taming of the intractable horse, Bucephalus, which would carry him into battle for twenty years, was almost the first element in the Alexander legend); and he had begun his formal education in debate and epic poetry.

Epic poetry meant Homer, whose celebration of the Greek heroic past was to determine Alexander's approach to life. Disregard for personal danger, the running of risk for its own sake, the dramatic challenge of single combat, the display of life-and-death courage under the eyes of men equal in their masculinity if not in social rank - such was the raw material of the Homeric canon, and on it Alexander's imagination began to feed in childhood. His first act, on entering Asia, would be to sacrifice at Troy, and he carried sacred armour kept in the temple there away with him on campaign. But the influence of the Homeric epic was intermingled with that of his mother's eccentric

and extreme religious beliefs. Hercules the task solver was to be the god whom Alexander always honoured most closely; Olympias worshipped Dionysus, the god of natural forces, who was traditionally venerated by slaughter, blood drinking and even human sacrifice.



It was unsurprising, therefore, that Philip should, as Alexander reached puberty, think it right to invest his upbringing with balance and rationality. Isocrates, the Athenian philosopher who had long advocated a Greek ‘crusade’ against Persia and looked to Philip to lead it, had hoped that one of his circle might be chosen as Alexander’s tutor. Instead Philip chose Aristotle, already famous as Plato’s most brilliant pupil, brought him to his court and set up a school for him at Mieza, a beauty spot near the capital of Pella, where Alexander and a group of young

Macedonian noblemen spent the next three years under his care.

What can have been the influence of one of the world's greatest thinkers on one of the world's foremost men of action is a conundrum by which almost every biographer of either figure has naturally been fascinated. Aristotle, to the modern world, is a philosopher, the founding father of empiricism. In his own time he was universal man, who, as Robin Lane Fox lists it, 'wrote books on the constitutions of 158 different states, edited a list of the victors in the games at Delphi, discussed music and medicine, astronomy, magnets and optics, made notes on Homer, analysed rhetoric, outlined the forms of poetry, considered the irrational side of men's nature, set zoology on a proper experimental course, was intrigued by bees and began the study of embryology'. We know that he also indulged Alexander's existing interests, because he prepared him a special text of the *Iliad*, which Alexander apparently kept thereafter under his pillow. Homer, in any case, would necessarily have formed part of the curriculum at Mieza because he did so in that of every well-educated Greek. But Aristotle also wrote pamphlets (now lost) for his pupil on kingship and colonies and schooled him in the disciplines of geometry, rhetoric and eristics, the art of arguing a case first from one side then from the other.

Alexander in short was given at Mieza the conventionally formal education of a contemporary son of privilege. And, as whenever the grand are set at the feet of the clever, probably as much of it stuck as could or would be grasped. Walter Pater's tutoring of Douglas Haig no more formed the future Field-Marshal into an aesthetic than Clausewitz's syllabus of instruction made the Prussian Crown Prince a strategic thinker. The exceptional fascination of the Aristotle-Alexander encounter has to do not with a meeting of minds but with a juxtaposition of opposites.

‘Aristotle,’ Victor Ehrenburg has concluded, ‘never succeeded in exercising definite political and philosophical influence upon Alexander. The meeting of genius with genius remained without a deeper meaning. The great creations of either were conceived and grew and took effect without any mutual impressions worth mentioning.’

If we are looking for an impression that did take effect, we will find it in the achievements, example and direct personal influence of his father. Philip II, but for his untimely death, might have been Alexander himself. He was violent enough, as grandiose in his ambitions and quite as calculating. But his energies were consumed by the effort to unify the Kingdom of Macedon, subjugate its barbarian neighbours and impose its control over civilized Greece. Those were the preliminaries absolutely essential to any assault on Persia, the conquest of which Philip, forty-six years old in 336, was still young and capable enough to undertake on his own account.

What he had done thus far would have been sufficient to persuade his son that the Persian expedition was no more than a natural extension of the course of Macedonian imperialism, itself chiefly an undertaking of will and courage. Philip had acceded to the throne of a kingdom long under the thumb of the great Greek states, Athens, Sparta and, more recently, Thebes, and chronically disturbed by the attacks of its uncivilized northern neighbours. In twenty years of continuous campaigning he had brought the northerners to heel; imposed Macedonian power over Thrace, Persia’s traditional foothold in Greece, Thessaly, and along the eastern Greek coast; had had himself nominated overlord of an invented alliance of Greek states; and finally, when Thebes and Athens rebelled, had definitively crushed their power in the battle of Chaeronea. Internally, meanwhile, he had carried through a social revolution among the Macedonian military class, in a fashion akin to that Frederick the Great would impose on