

1 MEMORY

Men do not learn much from the lessons of history and that is the most important of all the lessons of history.

Aldous Huxley,
Collected Essays, 1959

History seems most poignant when it is just out of reach. For my generation, born at the outbreak of the Second World War, the 20th century is forever cleaved by the events of that time. Everything that had happened seemed to have done so before the war, during the war, or, increasingly, after the war. Following conception at about the time of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (23rd August 1939), my arrival coincided with the Battle of France. Trouble lay ahead. Childhood was full of wartime artefacts. Army coats, great, winter warm, hung in the hall hitched over Barr and Stroud binoculars marked with an arrow and the initials WD (War Department). The Prismatic Compass Mk III we take on walks had been with my father in the Western Desert, at Tobruk and El Alamein, then Sicily and finally on to Gold Beach for Operation Overlord on the 6th June 1944. Now it helps us find our way around the Somerset levels. The vast army blanket upon which my sister, Elizabeth, was ill on a picnic near Stourton Tower in Somerset sixty-five years ago is still in the oak chest but thinner and corrupted by moth.

Great-uncle Jack, clean-shaven and in his Sam Browne, watches from the sideboard in aquatint, recalling Laurence Binyon's poem published in the *Times* in 1914: *They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old...* (see photo plate 1). He had been a married solicitor, aged thirty-seven years and was a major in the Hertfordshire Regiment. He died in a preliminary skirmish

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