

In the war room

The best-selling military historian and author of ‘Stalingrad’, Antony Beevor, invites York Membery into his headquarters

You don’t mind if I smoke?” asks the historian Antony Beevor, as he leads me up the stairs of his home to his first-floor office. “I gave up for a while but I find it helps with my writing. I try to wait until my 11 o’clock coffee before my first cigarette of the day.”

It’s a damp Monday morning at the handsome three-storey, late-Victorian terraced house near Parsons Green, south-west London, where Beevor, 64, lives with his wife, the biographer Artemis Cooper, who’s just hurrying out of the door. “I bought the house after leaving the army in 1970, and shared it with friends, before marrying Artemis in 1986,” says Beevor.

The author’s sales – including his “triangle of second world war books” (acclaimed histories of the D-Day campaign, and the battles for Stalingrad and Berlin) – are “fast approaching the 4.5m mark”, he notes with quiet satisfaction. Sales of *Stalingrad* (1998) alone stand at around 2m.

Books are scattered in the kitchen, on the landing and in the office. “It goes with the territory,” observes Beevor, with a puff on his cigarette. “Besides, I’m currently working on a new history of the 1939-1945 war – a terrifyingly large project, far bigger than anything I’ve ever done, which looks like it’s going to be around 900 pages long – so I need to make sure I’ve got the right books to hand.”

The historian, who’s dressed casually in an olive green jumper and faded jeans, adds wryly: “My wife thinks the publisher should give a roll of Tubigrip [a wrist-support bandage] away with the book.” This is a reference to the fact that, at 300,000 words, it is guaranteed to be hefty.

The house has a comfortable, lived-in look. Beevor, his wife and two children – one of whom is at university, the other studying for A-levels – divide their time between London and a 300-year-old home in Kent.

Yellow curtains frame the windows of the ground floor drawing room. This space, with its family heirlooms, antiques from around the world and ancestral portraits against pale blue wallpaper, is the most striking. But the real life of the house revolves around the kitchen, where Beevor makes me a coffee, and the “his and hers” offices on the first-floor.

“I’ve only ever known one couple who were able to share an office. But we work just down the corridor from each other, so if one of us is going to get a coffee...”

Beevor, whose father was a British army officer, went to one of the country’s most exclusive schools, Winchester. He joined



Bookish Antony Beevor in his study at his home near Parsons Green, south-west London, which he bought in 1970

Daniel Jones

the military and served in the 11th Hussars, a cavalry regiment based in Germany.

His five-year tenure was largely uneventful. He made senior lieutenant but never got to see action. The highlight of his time in the services was being taught by the military historian John Keegan at Sandhurst, the British army’s officer training college.

“He was a very stimulating teacher – constantly challenging ideas – but the greatest debt I owe him is the idea of looking at war from the bottom up rather than the top down,” says Beevor. “Earlier generations of writers have tended to describe warfare as a game of chess, rather than taking into account all the chaos and the fear, and this greatly influenced me.”

After leaving the army, he wrote a critically acclaimed history of the Spanish civil war (1982). However, it was his story of the epic clash at Stalingrad – arguably the second world war’s turning point – that made his name as a military historian.

Four years later came *Berlin: The Downfall 1945*, another critical and commercial success – although his recounting of the mass rapes committed by the Red Army in Germany sparked controversy in Russia.

MY FAVOURITE THINGS

Ancestral keepsakes

The historian is very fond of a portrait of his grandmother, Lina Waterfield, which hangs in the sitting room. “She was a formidable grande



dame who had little time for children,” he says. “I remember her only too well. This oil sketch by Derek Hill was done in Italy in 1956 and captures her very well.”

He is also proud of a magnificent north German marquetry desk in walnut dating back to the 18th century, pictured left.

“It has been in the family for a long time, and was used by five ancestors to write

their books,” he says. Finally, there is “the strangely beautiful” hand made in gilded lead – a paperweight – which fascinated him as a child, above. “It was a present from the great French philosopher Victor Cousin to my great-great-grandmother, Lucie Duff Gordon, just before his death in 1867,” he says. “Sadly, I have no idea of its significance.”



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