

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO



WINSTON CHURCHILL

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ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW
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by Paul Addison

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Introduction

It is almost impossible to exaggerate just how famous Churchill was at the end of the Second World War. Most people around the world would have known his name, heard his voice on the radio or seen his face beaming or glowering in the newsreels. At home in Britain, but also more widely among the allied nations, he was acknowledged as a great war leader. Fame and glory, however, are highly perishable commodities. It was also unclear that the wartime legend of Churchill would survive the scrutiny of historians. At the time of his death in January 1965 surprisingly little was known of the inside story of his politics, his statesmanship or his private life. Except for what Churchill himself had written, the evidence lay hidden in the archives, most of which were closed.

With the opening of the archives a boom in Churchill studies began. Of all the politicians of 20th century Britain he is the only one to have inspired an apparently never-ending cascade of books, articles and docu-dramas. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that his place in our past is still in dispute. He is as controversial today as he was for much of his lifetime, and most of those who study him fall, broadly speaking, into one of two schools of thought: the pro- and the anti-Churchill. Neutrality and indifference are rare.

The pro-Churchill case rests on two main contentions. The first is that in the Second World War he was the saviour of his country and more generally of freedom in the western world. He came to power in May 1940 at a point where Britain was demoralised and almost defeated. But for his leadership and inspiration, the British might have given up the struggle and allowed Hitler to conquer the whole of Europe. If he made serious mistakes – and most of his admirers concede that he did – they pale into insignificance in comparison with the achievements. Hence the historian Geoffrey Best can write:

In the years 1940 and 1941 he was indeed the saviour of the nation. His achievements, taken in all, justify his title to be known as the greatest Englishman of his age. I am persuaded that, in this later time, we are diminished if, admitting Churchill's failings and failures, we can no longer appreciate his virtues and victories.¹

The second contention is that Churchill was an exceptional human being, a rare and brilliant creature of extraordinary energy and vision, literary and rhetorical flair, physical and moral courage, a man of genius who stood head and shoulders above his rivals.

As Max Hastings puts it, Churchill was “the largest human being ever to occupy his office”.²

The anti-Churchill case starts from the proposition that he was more of a liability than an asset in World War Two. He inflicted great damage on the Empire, sacrificed the interests of Britain to those of the Soviet Union and the United States, and opened the door to socialism at home. His mistakes stemmed from overweening egotism, self-delusion and lack of strategic judgment, and his performance as a war leader was all of a piece with his earlier career, which had been littered with failures like the Gallipoli campaign of 1915. His legacy was the illusion that Britain had won the war and was still a great power when the reality was defeat and decline. The case is memorably summed up by John Charmley:

Churchill stood for the British Empire, for British independence and for an “anti-Socialist” vision of Britain. By July 1945 the first of these was on the skids, the second was dependent solely on America and the third had just vanished in a Labour election victory.³

On this analysis, Churchill’s heroic status is a skilfully propagated myth which it is incumbent on historians to demolish. It is no surprise that Churchill’s detractors, with some exceptions, take a hostile view of his motives and qualities. One of his more recent biographers, Nigel Knight,

Opposite: A World War II poster



describes his personality as “a mixture of arrogance, emotion, self-indulgence, stubbornness and a blind faith in his own ability.”⁴

The early years

How did the young Churchill achieve so much so quickly?

Restless ambition was the main driving force in Churchill’s life. From his schooldays at Harrow onwards his hunger for power and glory was transparent. At the age of 16 he confided to a fellow schoolboy that he sometimes dreamed of a future in which London would be in danger and it would fall to him, as the commander of the city’s defences, to save the capital and the Empire. Already he saw himself as a Man of Destiny, intended to play a heroic role in his nation’s history.

Churchill was born into an aristocracy which for centuries had supplied many of the nation’s rulers. He was a direct descendant of John Churchill, the first duke of Marlborough, Queen Anne’s victorious commander-in-chief during the War of the Spanish Succession. But it was above all his desire to emulate his father that inspired him to enter politics. Lord Randolph (1849-1895) was the impetuous third son of the seventh duke of

Marlborough. After a whirlwind courtship he married Jeanette Jerome (1854–1921), the daughter of a buccaneering New York financier, at the British Embassy in Paris on 15 April 1874. The date of Winston’s birth – 30 November – has given rise to speculation that he was conceived before the wedding, but he may simply have been a premature baby.

Churchill had a turbulent and in some ways unhappy childhood. He adored his father and mother but demanded more attention from them than upper class parents of the time usually gave to their children. Lord Randolph’s life was devoted mainly to politics: Winston could recall only two or three long and intimate conversations with him. Lady Randolph, meanwhile, revelled in high society. “She shone for me like the Evening Star,” Churchill wrote. “I loved her dearly—but at a distance.”⁵ His nanny, Mrs Everest, supplied the love and admiration he craved and he responded with remarkably open displays of affection for his “Woom” or “Woomany”. Churchill longed for his parents to visit him at school at Harrow. When they failed to do so he invited Mrs Everest instead and walked arm in arm with her up the High Street. During her final illness in July 1895 Churchill, by that time a Sandhurst cadet, rushed to her bedside, afterwards arranging the funeral and the erection of a gravestone.

Legend has it that Churchill was a dunce at

Harrow, but while absolutely refusing to learn Latin, which he detested, he demonstrated great ability in English, History, and Chemistry. As Gerald Woods Wollaston, a Harrow contemporary, recalled, “he resolutely refused to absorb anything that did not interest him”.

He also displayed an aggressively delinquent streak. Woods Wollaston observed that he “consistently broke almost every rule made by masters or boys, was quite incorrigible, and had an unlimited vocabulary of ‘back-chat’, which he produced with dauntless courage on every occasion of remonstrance”.⁶ According to his cousin, Shane Leslie, he was deeply unpopular and had to be rescued by a master when a set of bullies pushed him head downwards into a fold-up bed into which they poured water. “Far from emerging penitent, Winston walked up and down orating in his wrath to the effect that one day he would be a great man when they were nobodies and he would stamp and crush them!”⁷ He was not good at team games but shone at individual pursuits – he was a strong swimmer, excelled at rifle shooting, and won the public schools fencing championship in 1892.

None of this could appease his father when he twice failed the entrance exams for Sandhurst, passing in at the third attempt with marks too low to qualify him for the infantry. Lord Randolph threatened to break off all contact with his son and warned:

if you cannot prevent yourself from leading the idle useless unprofitable life you have had during your schooldays & later months you will become a mere social wastrel, one of the hundreds of the public school failures.⁸

At Sandhurst, where cadets were instructed in technical military topics like fortifications and tactics, Churchill was an eager and successful candidate, passing out 20th out of 130. His success, however, was overcast by the decline of Lord Randolph, who had risen to be Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1886 but resigned when the Cabinet and the Prime Minister rejected his proposals for cuts in the defence budget. He never held office again. As a cadet Churchill had begun to win his father’s respect, but the relationship was nipped in the bud by Lord Randolph’s death at the age of 45, on 24 January 1895.

This was a turning point. Churchill believed that his father’s death, like that of his uncle, the eighth duke of Marlborough, “was yet further proof that the Churchills died young”.⁹ He was henceforth driven by the need to vindicate his father’s reputation and to make his own mark before it was too late. He obtained his commission as a cavalry officer in the 4th Queen’s Own Hussars. Much as he enjoyed soldiering, however, he saw it chiefly as a means to an end: the making of a reputation that would propel him into the

House of Commons. He longed to emulate his father. The journalist J.B. Atkins has described how

when the prospects of a career like that of his father, Lord Randolph, excited him, then such a gleam shot from him that he was almost transfigured. I had not before encountered this type of ambition, unabashed, frankly egotistical, communicating its excitement, and extorting sympathy.¹⁰

Churchill's life is all too easily read as a tale of privilege, and his background certainly helps explain why he climbed so high at a comparatively young age. He was, nevertheless, a man of exceptional drive and outstanding ability. His physical courage was remarkable, his energy prodigious. At some point in the 1890s he began to realise his formidable skills as a writer and orator. Perhaps the critical year was 1895, when he undertook to write a series of dispatches from Cuba for the Daily Graphic, his first venture into journalism. It was also the year in which he met the Irish-American politician Bourke Cockran. More than half a century later he was still paying tribute to Cockran as the man who inspired his oratory and taught him how to use his voice: "He was my model. I learned from him how to hold thousands in thrall."¹¹

Opposite: Winston Churchill, the young cavalry officer, in 1895



In October 1896 Churchill sailed with his regiment to India. Quartered in the British military compound at Bangalore, with his ambitions fixed firmly on politics, he feared he would be handicapped by the lack of a University education. With the aid of books supplied by his mother, he turned himself into an autodidact, reading Plato, Adam Smith, Gibbon, Macaulay, Hallam, Lecky, Darwin, and Winwood Reade. The latter's *Martyrdom of Man*, a classic of Victorian atheism, completed his progressive loss of faith in Christianity and left him with a sombre vision of a godless universe in which humanity was destined, nevertheless, to progress through the conflict between the more advanced and the more backward races.

Churchill pursued a spectacular programme of self-advertisement between 1895 and 1900,



CHURCHILL'S 'BLACK DOG': FACT OR MYTH?

Some authorities maintain that Churchill suffered from severe and recurrent episodes of depression. The psychiatrist Anthony Storr, for example, has argued that Churchill

fought a lifelong battle against despair. In his view Churchill's ability to raise the spirits of his fellow citizens in the dire circumstances of 1940 was rooted in his ability to vanquish his own "Black Dog".

Churchill's official biographer, Sir Martin Gilbert, while recognising that he was naturally downcast when things went wrong, could find no

making his name and providing him with a platform for entry into politics. His strategy was to combine soldiering with authorship. With brash self-confidence and the assistance of his parents' contacts, he gate-crashed his way into battle, fighting Afghan tribesmen on the north-west frontier of India, the dervishes of the Sudan, and the Boers in South Africa. His escape from a Boer prisoner-of-war camp turned him briefly into a hero at home. Each time he managed to combine his military activities with working as a war correspondent. He expanded his dispatches into books: *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (1898), *The River War* (2 vols, 1899), *London to Ladysmith* (1900) and *Ian Hamilton's March* (1900). He even found time to write a novel, *Savrola* (1900), a melodramatic tale of a liberal revolution in an autocratic Mediterranean state.

evidence of an inherent tendency to depression. Many of Churchill's admirers are equally inclined to dismiss the Black Dog as a myth. They see him as an embodiment of healthy, extrovert masculinity, and do not warm to the idea that he possessed a psychological weakness or flaw.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about Churchill's inner life from

the scraps of evidence available. He does appear to have suffered a serious bout of depression at some point early in his career. He told his doctor, Lord Moran, that for two or three years "the light faded out of the picture. I did my work. I sat in the House of Commons, but black depression settled on me. It helped me to talk to Clemmie about it."¹² In July 1911 he wrote to Clemmie to

From MP to Cabinet minister

Did Churchill have a political ideology?

Churchill was first elected to the House of Commons as the Tory MP for Oldham in the general election of 1900. In 1904 he crossed the

say how interested he had been to hear of a German doctor who cured a cousin of depression: "I think this man might be quite useful to me – if my black dog returns. He seems quite away from me now – It is such a relief. All the colours came back into the picture. Brightest of all your dear face – my Darling."¹³ This is the only direct reference we have by Churchill himself to his Black Dog, but according to his doctor, his daughter Mary and his intimate friend Brendan Bracken, he spoke of it as a familiar problem. Bracken told Moran: "Winston has been so successful in controlling his fears that most people think of him as restless. But he has

had to struggle with a fearful handicap... You see, Charles, Winston has always been a 'despairer'."¹⁴

It is possible that Churchill suffered as a young man from a phase of depression that lifted and did not return. There is, however, no evidence to show that he was permanently afflicted, and none to show that he was bipolar. After his death his private secretary, Jock Colville, asked his wife for her views on the subject. "She was quite positive," Colville wrote, "that although her husband was occasionally depressed – as indeed most normal people are – he was not abnormally subject to long fits of depression."¹⁵ ■

floor of the House over the question of free trade, and took his seat with the Liberals on the Opposition benches. The consequences of the decision for his career were immense. In the general election of 1906 a last great revival lifted the party into power and Churchill climbed rapidly to the top of British politics. The Prime Minister Campbell Bannerman gave him his first post as Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office (1905-8). On succeeding to the premiership in 1908 Herbert Asquith raised him to the Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade (1908-10), going on to appoint him as Home Secretary (1910-11) and First Lord of the Admiralty (1911-15).

This rapid ascent marked him out as a potential prime minister, but his change of party came at a price. Most Conservatives reviled him as a turncoat and when the opportunity for revenge eventually arose they struck hard, inflicting near fatal damage on his career. His change of party raised a question that was to haunt him for the rest of his political life: was he, whatever his abilities or achievements, anything more than a great opportunist?

Even before his entry into the House of Commons Churchill was something of a misfit in party politics. In April 1897, while a 22-year-old subaltern in Bangalore, he wrote to Lady Randolph:

I am a Liberal in all but name. My views excite the pious horror of the Mess. Were it not for