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Churchill and the Historians

Robert Vogel

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More seriously but not Copp's fault there is a major problem with the transcription of French names. Major Léon Brosseau, D Company commander, killed in action, is referred to as Lucien. Killed in the same action is the mortar platoon commander, Captain Orieux, referred to in the book as Oriens. A friend of this reviewer, Major Alex Angers, shot through the throat, is referred to as Alexander not as Alexandre, which is his real name. These may seem small errors but in work such as this, precision is most desirable if only out of respect. In a three-line quote requiring simple transcription (p.111) there are five mistakes. An alert and qualified proof reader could have spotted these errors.

Copp's conclusion that the Canadians proved the equals, indeed, the betters of their enemies is contrary to the impressions created by Canada's dean of military history, C.P. Stacey. The tendency in Stacey's time was to perpetuate the Canadian propensity to self-denigration: something which Copp and others are no longer willing to accept. The performance of the officers and men of 5 CIB bears witness to their forbearance in the face of the staggering odds stacked against them emanating paradoxically at times from the pettiness and incompetence of some of their own superiors. Had they been trained in the best way to meet the realities of the battlefield? At a very heavy cost, they bested those who had for too long been considered the best. The leadership, Copp correctly concludes, had been much too slow in realizing the absolute need for adequate force-ratios to overcome well-equipped and desperate defensive forces.

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Churchill and the Historians

Robert Vogel

Robert Blake & Roger Louis, eds. *Churchill: A Major Reassessment of his Life in Peace and War*. London: Oxford University Press, 1992. 581 pages. £19.95 (Not yet available in Canada).

Tuvia Ben-Moshe. *Churchill: Strategy and History*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992. 397 pages. \$45.00 U.S.

Richard Lamb. *Churchill as War Leader: Right or Wrong?* London: Bloomsbury, 1991. 400 pages. \$22.95 U.S.

John Charmley. *Churchill, The End of Glory: A Political Biography*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992. 742 pages. \$45.00.

Among the vast number of books recently published about the Second World War, a large number are biographies of Churchill or analyses of his place in that struggle, a reasonable enough endeavour in that not even his harshest critics can deny his importance in World War Two.

The immediate reaction to the selection of books on Churchill reviewed below is that, with one exception, they add little to the vast body of material which already exists on the subject of Churchill and the war in general.

Churchill was a prolific writer and he has left behind a huge body of written material. Moreover he rushed to publish his memoirs immediately after the Second World War as well as after the

First (of which Lord Balfour so aptly said; "I hear that he has written a big book about himself and called it 'The World Crisis.'"). Apparently everyone whoever talked to him or saw him in the distance has left behind some clever entry in his diary or memoirs. Consequently there exists an absolute treasure trove of material from which to mine endless quotations by which one can prove a variety of likely and not so likely interpretations of his actions.

"Not only did Mr. Churchill both get his war and run it: he also got in the first account of it."¹ It was an account, moreover, that was not only massive and well-written, but one that was also replete with documentation. That meant that Churchill had not only "run" the Second World War but that he had also set the agenda for those, at least those concerned with British History, who began the process of writing about it. But after fifty years and the opening of most of the archives, this advantage has begun to wear off. Now Churchill can be criticized not only for what he did but also for what he said he had done. No doubt that is a problem for all those who are tempted to write their memoirs, which nowadays seems to be a substantial portion of the population, but a book about Churchill, his actions and memoirs can still create enough interest to get the author close to the best-seller list.

That Churchill had enormous influence on the direction of the British war effort has not yet been called into question, at least not in the four books reviewed below. He was aware that "running" a war was not an easy matter, as he had personally experienced in World War One during his somewhat disastrous stint as First Lord of the Admiralty. He was also aware that strategy and war-making only look easy "That is why critics can write so cogently, and yet successful

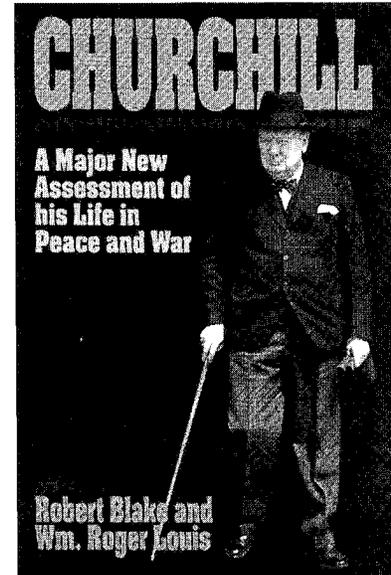
performers are so rare.”² The same comment might well be made about writers, particularly perhaps, writers and historians whose subject is Winston Churchill and his wars. These fall into a number of categories: 1) Those who are concerned with trying to deal seriously with some issues of his career which might need some further exploration; 2) Those who have some special case to make about a particular but naturally crucial aspect of his work; 3) Those who seem to write simply because so many others have and 4) Those who have some contemporary political axe to grind and want to use him for that purpose.

Churchill: A Major Reassessment of his Life in Peace and War, edited by Robert Blake and Roger Louis is the result of a conference held at the University of Texas in March 1991 and clearly falls into the first category. It was a gathering of some of the most distinguished historians of the period and the book reflects the expertise which they brought to the conference. There are twenty-nine different essays, each dealing with a particular aspect of Churchill's life and career. The essays are naturally rather uneven in quality — Craig manages to write about Churchill's view of Germany without dealing with “unconditional surrender” or “strategic bombing” in a rather innocuous essay on an important subject; Johnson similarly has very little new to say about Churchill's relationship with France; Pelling, dealing with Churchill and the Labour Party, leaves out what is surely one of the most important elements of that relationship, namely that of Churchill and Attlee during the War itself;³ Michael Howard contributes a somewhat disappointing essay on Churchill and the First World War which is rather bland for that usually brilliant historian but nevertheless covers all the main points. There are a good many other contributions

which seem to add little to what is already well known, although they contain very few instances where one can seriously quarrel with the authors. Perhaps R.V. Jones's, “Churchill and Science,” should be singled out as an essay which does not even live up to its title — it is really an essay about the relationship between Churchill and Lindemann and not a very useful one at that. It does not deal with the really important issues — such as “Operational Research” — which is surely as important an aspect of Churchill's use of science as Lindemann's ability to calculate the amount of champagne Churchill had drunk — an extremely well-worn story.

On the other hand, Addison provides a very useful and effective summary of his latest book,⁴ which should provide much food for thought for those who see Churchill only as a somewhat flamboyant warrior. D.C. Watt's essay on Appeasement is critical but fair, as is Hinsley's on Intelligence. Blake provides a meticulous and detailed account of Churchill's succession to Chamberlain in May 1940, which is an important balance to the often held view that his succession was both popular and inevitable. Keegan has perhaps the most difficult task because of the vast literature in the field of Churchillian strategy. He offers a reasonable account of an often highly emotional and controversial subject, which includes everything from strategic bombing, the “Second Front,” and the Mediterranean strategy to the Balkans and Churchill's relations with Stalin.

This is not a book which can easily be read in a single sitting but it will surely become a serious reference work. Its footnotes provide the reader with a fair cross-section of current research into many aspects of the first half of the twentieth century and it expresses, often elegantly and succinctly, the



ideas of historians who have made distinguished contributions in their fields. Individually some of the essays are often highly critical of Churchill but collectively, as the editors point out in their introduction:

The book pays tribute to his stature, though sometimes the investigation is critical and the judgements are unflattering. The critical line of approach must not be misinterpreted as an attempt to diminish Churchill's reputation. On the contrary, when subjected to scrutiny in the light of historical evidence, Churchill emerges with both his integrity and his greatness intact. [p.8]

It remains to be said that it is a pity that neither Martin Gilbert, the author of the massive “authorized” biography nor any of the now fairly numerous detractors were present at the conference.

Tuvia Ben-Moshe's book *Churchill: Strategy and History* belongs in many respects to the second category. The author promises not only to clarify Churchill's strategy in both World Wars but also to show how Churchill's versions of what happened are at great variance with what he actually did. This is

a formidable task and Ben-Moshe claims that he only reluctantly came to it after he had devoted “years to the study of military history and strategy.” [p.4] The first chapter traces Churchill’s changing views, particularly on the question of the “continental commitment” from 1900-1914. Its conclusion is rather unexceptional, as is Ben-Moshe’s narrative over the question of Britain’s declaration of war in 1914. The question of the Dardanelles campaign is obviously the centrepiece of the discussion about the first war. The failure of that enterprise and Churchill’s part in it are well established,⁵ and Ben-Moshe’s attempt to place this failure into a much wider context of grand strategy and historical understanding are somewhat unconvincing. “Churchill wanted to have the best of all worlds: he wished to avoid the extremely costly direct offensives: but at the same time he called for a strategy of attrition (which involved killing as many Germans as possible) and for the sort of grand maneuver that has not been possible since 1916.” [p.79] The author then rightly points out that such strategy was impossible in that war and that the only alternative was a compromise peace. This is no doubt correct but it did not happen. Concluding this section, the author states that “the broad tenor of the spirit conveyed in Churchill’s “World Crisis” is that, had his strategic plans been fully accepted and properly carried out, the war would have been shorter and less costly to the Allies.” [p.81] Of course Churchill is entitled to a hypothetical and egocentric opinion but such an opinion is surely no more amenable to proof than the author’s view that “. . . had the strategy that Churchill advocated after the end of 1915 indeed been fully implemented, then Germany would not have been defeated in 1918.” [p.81] Unfortunately the idea that one can readily tell the outcome of what did not happen lies at the heart of Ben-Moshe’s critique of Churchill’s strategy.

Churchill in opposition is more to Ben-Moshe’s liking. He thinks that although Churchill’s “assessments were now partly mistaken and characterized by conservatism” they nevertheless were more correct “when compared with predictions of most military men in Britain and France . . .” [p.120] Again Ben-Moshe is convinced that he can tell what was likely to happen if, in this case, Churchill’s policy had been adopted. Churchill’s stay at the Admiralty receives little attention in this book. In matters which seem marginal to the author, the Norwegian campaign for instance, he simply claims that this fiasco was just a repetition of the Gallipoli campaign [he again leaves out the French dimension] and suggests that in this case “the strategic consequences were not far reaching.” [pp.123-4] Indeed much of the summer of 1940, including the Battle of France, the Battle of Britain and the Battle of the Atlantic hardly receive any mention at all. It is naturally the decision to defend the Mediterranean strategy and the consequences of this action with respect to the U.S. Alliance and the second front which are the centrepiece of the book.

In this Ben-Moshe joins a long line of authors who have very definite views on this question.⁶ He describes carefully and reasonably the usual catalogue of errors made during 1941, particularly the halt of the British armies in North Africa and the decision to intervene in Greece. However it is important to note that these decisions were made within the context of the Mediterranean strategy, not alternatives to it. Surely the whole question of Churchill’s decision to defend the Eastern Mediterranean in the fall of 1940 was based on the premise that German strategy was bound to give first priority to the defeat of Britain. Churchill can be

accused of foolhardiness because he did not know, when he made his major decisions, that Hitler regarded the Mediterranean by the spring of 1941 as a distraction from his more important concerns. This is not a point, however, which the author emphasises. Rather he takes issue with Michael Howard’s view that the “real” Mediterranean strategy should be dated from the fall of 1942 and that what went before were simply the piecemeal responses to the difficulties of the summer of 1940. [p.166] It is not unreasonable to argue that obviously the British had committed themselves to a serious campaign in the Mediterranean before either the Russians or the Americans were attacked, but it is not so easy to dismiss the essence of Howard’s argument that the commitment to the North-African campaign [Operation “Torch”] represented the point at which the Mediterranean strategy becomes a matter for serious debate, both from the point of view of Anglo-U.S. relations and in terms of the timing of the invasion of North-West France.

Ben-Moshe tries to prove that in fact Churchill did not change in his strategy after Pearl Harbour, and that indeed his strategy had neither an imperial nor a clear political aim in 1943. Certainly the existing documentation does bear out the idea that in the period 1940-3, Churchill’s overwhelming pre-occupation was the winning of the war, rather than preserving the Empire. That seems to be the main thrust of Ben-Moshe’s accusation, that Churchill really had no strategy at all, in the sense that strategy ought to have a clear political aim. Although why so many authors seem to think that winning the war against the Axis Powers was not a political aim remains mysterious. However the lack of political aim is certainly the main thrust of the conclusion of Chapter 8.



Churchill at the controls of the Boeing Flying Boat which carried him across the Atlantic on 14 January 1942.

Unlike others who have accused Churchill of deliberately delaying the opening of the second front for political reasons, Ben-Moshe takes a rather different line. He does not think that an invasion of France could have succeeded in 1943, adding "By its nature, that hypothesis is not amenable to decisive proof." [p.274] But he does not follow his own advice about hypotheses, because he now argues that had the issue been left to Churchill alone, there would not have been an invasion in 1944 either. But surely that again rests on an even more remote hypothesis — which is that in 1944, there was no Russian Front and no U.S. Army in Europe. It is also based on a rather special reading of certain documents, most particularly the meeting of 19 October 1943. But surely that meeting, like so many others, has to be put into context. Churchill may have had exaggerated fears of the power of

the German Army, but the author does not help his case by failing to recognize the actual course of the battle in Russia, on which, after all, so many calculations with respect to the "second front" were based. For instance his claim that the German Armies had effectively been defeated by the end of 1943 comes as something of a surprise. "By the end of 1943 it [the Soviet Union] had effectively defeated the German Army; its forces had reached lines approximating Russia's old borders before the outbreak of World War II." [p.284] It is true that Vatutin's First Ukrainian Army Group had crossed the 1939 Polish border in the centre of the Pripet marshes and taken Sarny by January 12th, but on that same date Leningrad was still under siege, Army Group Centre was less than 75 miles from Smolensk, the Crimea was still occupied, Odessa was still in German hands, in fact the line north of Pripet marshes would not

change drastically until June 1944; although the siege of Leningrad was lifted and the Estonian border reached by 2 March 1944. Clearly the German Army's offensive power had been effectively contained, but the notion that it had been fully defeated is simply untrue.

It is into this general context, [Kiev was not recaptured by the Russians until 6 November 1943] plus the growing apprehension of the new German weapons that the meeting of 19 October needs to be placed. The argument that this meeting, as well as some others, were clear indications that Churchill wanted to avoid "Overlord" altogether are really far from obvious.⁷ But again the major difficulty is that in fact the invasion did take place and therefore Churchill's intentions during the second half of 1943, had he been without any allies, remain a matter for speculation.

In Ben-Moshe's last chapter, which deals with the post-invasion strategy, Churchill is again accused of misunderstanding the relationship between military strategy and political aims which now naturally revolve around the Russian question. Ben-Moshe quotes Liddell Hart tentatively to suggest that a great opportunity had been missed in September to bring the war to an end in 1944. He also enlists Martin van Creveld to suggest that Montgomery's strategy, the proper way to win in 1944, might at least have brought the Allies to the Ruhr, although van Creveld concludes his discussion of this whole subject with "In the final account the question as to whether Montgomery's plan presented a real alternative to Eisenhower's strategy must be answered in the negative."⁸

In his concluding chapter Ben-Moshe argues that by the time the invasion took place, the Germans had already been defeated and that the only real purpose for the invasion was to shorten the war and to find a reasonable political settlement with the Soviet Union. [p.320] That no doubt will come as a surprise to the millions of Allied and Axis soldiers who had to fight their way through those last bitter months of the war. Given that he has argued previously that the invasion was not really possible in 1943, it is difficult to understand what the real alternatives were or why he considers that the Germany was already beaten in 1943, except, of course, in hindsight.

Despite the meticulous scholarship and the carefully nuanced paragraphs, it is difficult to find this book convincing; nevertheless its criticisms of Churchill's strategy are often thought-provoking and will certainly find their place with the others who have attempted to be better strategists than Churchill,

at least in their books. Nor, given some of the questions raised above, can one readily agree that Churchill's "Second World War," whatever its faults, "is a false version of events." [p.333]

Richard Lamb's book *Churchill as War Leader: Right or Wrong?* offers a quite different fare from the two books reviewed above. It really falls into the third category. Lamb claims that this book was especially designed to introduce the subject to "University and sixth form students" and that he is an admirer of Churchill. In fact he concludes that, "Alone Winston Churchill saved Western civilization from destruction at the hands of the Nazis." [p.339] The difficulty is that there is very little in this book that would convince anyone that this was so and it is, moreover, often expressed in a rather simplistic fashion.

Surely Lamb is wrong to think that students should be fed a fare of utter simplicity, such as his first chapter on appeasement. "Post-war evidence entirely vindicates Churchill's claim that the military situation in 1938 was such that it was folly to capitulate to Hitler at Munich." [p.12] is one of many declaratory sentences which turn this first chapter into something less than a reasonable historical exercise.

Lamb takes us through the fall of France and the summer of 1940 without mentioning either the Battle of Britain or the air attacks on Britain during the winter of 1940-1. In Chapter 8 we are told that "Churchill had secret intelligence that the risk of invasion was diminishing," [p.83] so he sent tanks to the Middle East. It is a pity that Hinsley did not know this when he wrote his careful study of the British Intelligence on the German invasion plans [see particularly Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, Volume I Chapter 5].

In the chapter in which Lamb considers the question of the Far East, he argues that Churchill was anxious for a war between Japan and the U.S.A., as that would draw the Americans into a war with Germany. The problem is that none of the evidence which Lamb presents supports this argument.

Unfortunately much of the rest of the book follows this pattern. Unquestionably the surrender of Singapore marked one of the lowest points for Churchill in the war; still it remains a puzzle why there is a long chapter on the fall of Singapore, with considerable detail about the sinking of Force Z, [Lamb's view that the Japanese "Zero" was far superior to the Brewster Buffalo available in the Malaya peninsula is of course quite right, except that the Japanese attacking aircraft had no fighter cover.] A chapter on India follows but nothing on the submarine war, then also at its height, and far more serious, in Churchill's view, than his problems in India. Nor can we find anything about the resources and the debates devoted to the strategic air offensive against Germany [except for the short reference, on p.151, quoted above.]

There seems no explanation for the emphasis that Lamb puts on various aspects of the war. Churchill's policy in the Aegean, his desire to bring Turkey into the war and his "blunders" in Yugoslavia are described in two informative chapters but somewhat out of proportion with respect to the other elements in the war, particularly since the other resistance movements are hardly mentioned. Lamb is on somewhat firmer ground when he deals with the campaign after D-day, having already written a book on this subject. Still even here there some very curious ideas for someone who professes to admire Churchill. For instance the notion, which is also in his larger work,⁹ that Churchill

feared that General Montgomery was stealing his limelight. [p.281]

Lamb's conclusion goes over much the same ground as his chapters — Mers-el-Kebir remains — “possibly his gravest wartime blunder” [p.340] — “In his memoirs Churchill has falsified history not only over the pusillanimity of Halifax and Chamberlain in 1940, but over other important episodes . . . Why? He had nothing of which to be ashamed. . . .” [p.340] Churchill may have been a great wartime leader but that surely cannot be illustrated from a book which leaves out some of the most important and difficult campaigns of the war and makes a good many mistakes which are so elementary that a reasonable editor ought to have caught them . . . with friends like this who needs enemies?

Still there are enemies. Charmley's book clearly belongs in the fourth category. Once upon a time there was a great and peaceful Empire called the British Empire until a man called Winston Churchill came along and was nasty to a nice man called Hitler and nice to a nasty man called Roosevelt and so brought about the end of Glory! Actually, the theme of Charmley's *Churchill, the End of Glory* is only slightly more complicated than the above summary. It is a very large political biography (742 pp), which stops in 1945, divided into fifty-five chapters, all of them with witty titles. The first section which takes Churchill from birth to 1915 deals briefly and sharply with the young Churchill and his overweening ambition and selfishness. It shows Charmley at his best, the writing has flair and the quotations, from a variety of sources, are trenchant and amusing. Churchill's first parting with the Conservative Party over the question of Free Trade is handled with vigour and even fairness. So, in some respects, are his policies as President of the

Board of Trade and at the Home Office. However the strain is beginning to show although only in a minor way — on p.65 Charmley deals fairly with the question of the sending of troops to Tonyandy but on p.67 he declares that “The myth of Churchill calling out the troops at Tonyandy was, like that of King Afred burning the cakes, symbolically true; it epitomized an attitude.” And at the bottom of the same page, the “battle of Sydney Street” “seemed to epitomise Churchill's defects.” So the rather amusing young man is beginning to turn into a rather more dangerous political animal.

Charmley's opinion of the work of Churchill at the Admiralty before the outbreak of the First World War underlines this change. He signals this on p.74 “. . . indeed without Churchill at the Admiralty, the policy of the Entente might well have broken down,” and ends the discussion of the whole naval question by showing how far Britain was committed to France by 1914 and that this was the result of Churchill not understanding the political consequences of his naval policies. [p.82] That is not an indefensible position. Certainly British Naval policy in the pre-war period was of political consequence and Churchill, in concentrating the Fleet in the North Sea, gave the French the sense that their security outside the Mediterranean depended on British Naval dispositions. Still one would have more confidence in Charmley's naval judgements if he had not started World War One with “the sinking of several ships at Scapa Flow by German submarines” and demoting the German Battlecruiser *Goeben* to the status of a cruiser. [p.99] As a cruiser she would no doubt have had little influence in creating the situation in which the Russians declared war on Turkey . . . as a Battlecruiser, which bombarded Russian naval ports in the Black Sea, it really was quite another matter.

The Dardanelles failure obviously made Churchill's position precarious. Still Charmley argues that it was because Churchill had alienated so many that he could not survive the failure [p.126], it was the fact that he was so “immensely self-absorbed . . .” “. . . such egoism is common in children but has usually rubbed away by the time adulthood is reached” [p.136] In other words the substance of the failure had less to do with his loss of office than his character. It is a point to which Charmley returns on numerous occasions in this long book. It is of course a view of history which spares historians the necessity of trying to trace the course of events and allows them to deal largely with extracts from diaries and memoirs, a technique that used to be called “scissors and paste,” now made even simpler with the use of computers!

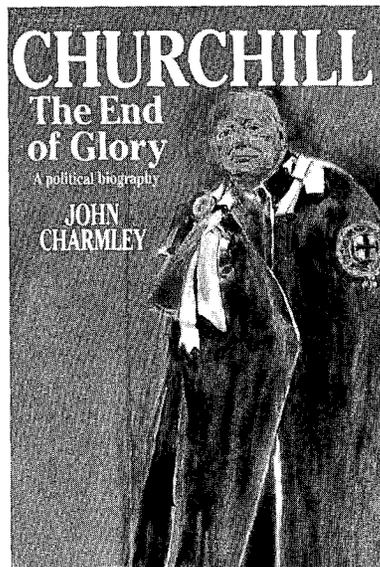
The second section of the book covers the period from 1915 to 1939 — “The Lost Leader.” After his time in the trenches — Charmley never robs Churchill of his personal courage — there is the return to politics. Lloyd George wanted “someone who would cheer him up,” so he brought back Churchill despite the opposition of virtually all his colleagues. [pp.144-5] With this begins his second career, the main event of which, according to Charmley, was the futile intervention in Russia, which brought down on him the ire of the Prime Minister. By February 1920 another of Churchill's schemes lay in ruins and “once again, Churchill had demonstrated his greatest gift — that of isolating himself by alienating his supporters without winning over his old enemies.” [p.157]

The pattern for the book has now been set. There are passages where Charmley seems to consider seriously the policies and ideas of Churchill and the Governments in which he served, there are passages

which are elegant and caustic . . . “Churchill’s defense of the treaty [the Irish Treaty] in the Commons the following day was one of his most effective speeches, thus proving the truth of his own comment that “the essence of statesmanship is platitude,” there would be a final reconciliation between all the Irish and the English, “. . . Lacking both fanaticism and religion, Churchill was singularly ill-placed to understand those over-endowed with both.” [pp.175-76] However the temptation to get in another sharp quotation prevents Charmley from developing any single theme coherently for more than a couple of pages, so the reader is often left with a jumble of confused and contradictory ideas. Churchill’s espousal of lost causes in this section — Free Trade, Egypt, India,¹⁰ Edward VIII — are difficult to reconcile with the ruthless, single-minded ambitious politician described so far. It may be that Charmley really has much sympathy with Churchill’s attempt to stop the continuous erosion of British power and influence and is really rather angry at him for not succeeding. Still Charmley recognizes that “The considerations of economy, of public opinion and of the strategic weakness of the Empire which informed imperial policy also informed British foreign policy; in both cases Churchill ignored the limitations of power.” [p.290]

This informs much of the discussion of Churchill’s opposition to Chamberlain’s policy after 1937. That Churchill was often wrong, for example in his calculations about German air power, that he did not object to appeasing Italy, that his call for “Grand Alliance” with a suspicious Russia and a isolationist America was wishful thinking is really no longer seriously disputed. Nor can there be much dispute with the fact that Chamberlain seems to have understood the “limitations of

power” better than his critics. But that should not lead Charmley into the startling conclusion that “The real effect of the German occupation of Prague was on the position of Churchill,” [p.359] although it does illustrate Charmley’s almost unbelievable parochialism. Chamberlain may well have continued to believe that he could find a way to avoid war, but he now set about it in a manner that cannot be described as simply minor changes in tactics. Charmley spends some time dealing with the abortive negotiations with the Russians and mentions the guarantees to Poland but the critical decision to commit the British Army once again to the continent and the beginning of conscription seems to have entirely escaped his attention.



Part III, “The Trumpets Silver Sound, 1939-1945” represents nearly a third of the book. But once the war begins Charmley, to borrow one of his chapter headings, is completely “at sea.” His description of Churchill at the Admiralty leaves out almost everything that happened; one cannot tell whether Churchill, the second time around, was a successful First Lord or not, because while we are treated to a garbled account of “Operation

Catherine,” there is nothing here about the German submarines, or about Ocean raiders, about magnetic mines. Charmley seems to have read Lamb, [whom he accuses of “addictions to old myths” p.381, fn.70] but not anything serious about the war at sea. He thinks that naval historians are a peculiar “sub-species” [see p.373 fn.16 in which he even gets Lamb’s view wrong]; still they might have helped him to understand what it was that Churchill and the Royal Navy were doing in the winter of 1939-40. He might even have got the month of Operation “Menace” right [p.421], or stopped believing that “Ultra” was a German code [p.437] which had been broken by October 1940.

The naval historians might also have helped him in his description of the Norwegian campaign. It was of course a disaster for which much blame can be attached to Churchill’s handling of the Fleet. But nothing in Charmley’s narrative clarifies a very confusing campaign nor does it add anything to our understanding of Churchill’s part in it. Naturally judgements are not lacking, “At this stage of the war, and for years to come, Churchill grossly overestimated what could be achieved by sea-power.” [p.384]¹¹ This is a most peculiar judgement about a campaign in which the German Navy had just achieved precisely the sort of successful landing operations of which Churchill so often dreamt.

The domestic consequences of this failure brings Charmley back to his home ground, back to snippets from diaries, parliamentary debates and Churchill’s views of history and his oratory. For the next three chapters we go through the summer of 1940, a summer of cabinet meetings and great speeches, for example Churchill’s speech on June 4th “. . . We shall go on to the end . . .” “It

was” concludes Charmley, “sublime — nonsense — but sublime nonsense.” [p.411] Perhaps we can be persuaded to accept this judgement if we were told something about what actually happened in the summer of 1940 outside Spears’ and Sackville-West’s diaries, but this is a summer of 1940 with no Germans at all. No German aircraft over Britain, no Dowding, who is not mentioned in this account, no German invasion plans, no German submarines sinking ships and as we get to the fall and winter, no Blitz. It is indeed magic. Chapter 37, is entitled “The Struggle for Survival,” but the survival that Charmley has in mind is Churchill’s position as Prime Minister, not the relationship between German and British plans and actions. Almost everything about the war is reduced to single sentences, “The R.A.F. could maintain Britain’s independence from Germany, but there was not much anyone could do to preserve it vis-a-vis America,” [the only mention of the R.A.F. in this connection, p.431] . . . but to follow this critique through would mean dealing with virtually every page of the book. As the war goes on, German, Italian and Japanese actions become more and more remote, noises off-stage. The Russo-German conflict gets one sentence mentions here and there, as do the U.S. campaigns in the Pacific. To write a biography of Churchill without the slightest understanding of the course of the war seems fool-hardy — but that is essentially what Charmley has done. The last chapters become muddled and weave together different themes often over-lapping and sometimes contradictory. It is all an attack on St. George, but there are no dragons, except Roosevelt and Stalin. Indeed while poor Mosley gets arrested just to support Churchill’s attempt to find unity at home [p. 425], there is no mention of Nazi policies in occupied Europe, not even the massacre of the Jews.



The strain of recent events shows clearly in Churchill's face at Moscow airport, 12 August 1942.

Charmley sums up his view of what happened:

Germany, Churchill had said, was a menace to the balance of power, and it was obvious that her ambitions were greater than Hitler admitted; she must be stopped. But in order to do so Churchill was forced to bankrupt Britain and mortgage its future to the United States - and, in the process, he had helped raise the spectre of a menace which was even greater than the one he had destroyed, if only because there was no balance of terror on the Continent. Hitler had had to keep an eye on the Soviet Union; who did Stalin have to keep an eye upon? This, then, was where the road to victory led. [pp.589-90]

The “balance of power” becomes a “balance of terror” within the space of two sentences and the notion that Stalin did not have to keep his eye on a United States and Britain armed with an atomic bomb would no doubt come as a surprise to him. But it is typical of the kind of judgements that Charmley offers, for while it is true

that the Soviet Union under Stalin expanded into Eastern Europe at the end of the war and that a reign of terror descended onto those areas as well as Eastern Germany, it is equally true that in contrast with Hitler during the war, when all of Europe lay under his power, Stalin had “only” a small part of it. It was not perhaps an ideal outcome of the war, but it was not the total catastrophe which Charmley claims.

If Charmley set out to destroy myths, as he says so often, he has failed to do so, both because the myths he tackles are petty and because he has failed to understand the major problems of the war and with them Churchill’s part in that war. Perhaps some knowledge of military history is, after all, a requirement for writing about the war. Moreover a totally insular view of the world which revolves exclusively around the diaries of English politicians and “literati” makes it difficult to understand a World War. If Charmley is a typical example of the new breed of British

historians it is truly the "end of Glory."

Possibly a reassessment of Churchill has become necessary fifty years after the end of the Second World War, but none of the books reviewed, except the first, can be taken as a successful or even a serious attempt at such a task. Perhaps Taylor, a historian also fond of "making the facts fit his phrases," should have the last word:

Late in life Churchill pronounced a gloomy verdict on his career. He remarked that the final verdict of history would take account not only of the victories achieved under his direction, but also of the political results which flowed from them and he added: "Judged by this standard, I am not sure that I shall be held to have done very well." Churchill did himself an injustice. The results were not his doing; the victories were. The results were foreshadowed when the British people resolved on war with Hitler. From that moment on it followed inexorably that, unless Hitler won, Soviet Russia would establish her domination of Eastern Europe and become a world power.¹²

Even that domination has now come to an end.

The British Empire has also gone, and despite Charmley, it was not really inherited by the United States; there are even those who argue that Canada still has some independence. Nor is it certain that the end of Empires was brought about by the war; the war ironically only reinforced the nationalism which was already such a powerful force in the early 20th century. Churchill's place in all this is clearly important but he did not have the power to reverse this trend. Among the Hitlers, Stalins, Mussolinis and Francos he can hardly be accused of making the world an even worse place than it already was. Whatever his faults

he, together with those who supported him, and they were a large portion of the British and Dominion populations, managed, with considerable difficulty, to prevent Britain from suffering the fate that befell nearly all of the other European states at the hands of the Nazi Regime. If that is myth, what is reality?

NOTES

1. H.N. Fieldhouse, *The Anglo-German War of 1939-42: Some movements to end it by a negotiated Peace*. Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, 1971.
2. W.S. Churchill, *Marlborough, His Life and Times*, Volume II (London, 1967), p.93.
3. See in particular T.D. Burridge, *British Labour and Hitler's War*, which surely remains a key book on that particular war-time partnership.
4. Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front, 1900-1955* (Cape, 1992)
5. Nevertheless Ben-Moshe's bibliography in this subject is rather restricted. His discussion virtually ignores the French part in the Gallipoli campaign - see for instance G.H. Cassar, *The French and Dardanelles* (Allen and Unwin, 1971). This is surely an important aspect of the whole campaign, particularly its political ramifications.
6. For example: Turnball-Higgins, *Winston Churchill and the Second Front* (Oxford, 1957), J. Grigg, *1943 - The Victory That Never Was* (New York, 1980), W.S. Dunn, *Second Front Now - 1943* (Alabama, 1980).
7. Ben-Moshe in his article in the *Journal of Modern History* [Volume 62, No.3, 9/1990] "Winston Churchill and the Second Front: A Reappraisal," has made this argument, particularly with respect to the 19 October meeting, before. For a reasoned rebuttal of his position see B.P. Farrell, *War by Consensus: Power, Perception and British Grand Strategy 1940-1943*. Unpublished Ph.D thesis, McGill University 1991. pp.627-630.
8. Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War*, (Cambridge, 1977), p.230.
9. Richard Lamb, *Montgomery in Europe 1943-45, Success or Failure* (London, 1983), p.72.
10. For a more reasonable description of Churchill and the India issue, as well as other questions relating to the "Old Tories" see A. Krishtalka, *The Old Tories and British Foreign Policy, 1930-1939*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, 1983, particularly Chapter V.
11. One of the consistent problems with Churchill's strategy throughout the war was his failure to give adequate priority to the Royal Navy, because while he understood that the Navy could lose the war, he was convinced that only the Air Force could win it. If one wishes to take exception to this well documented, one might even say elementary, aspect of Churchill's view of how to conduct the war against Germany, one does need to understand and explain the disputes, among the most critical of the war, which surround this question. That Charmley does not even touch this issue simply underlines his total lack of understanding of the war.
12. A.J.P. Taylor, "Daddy, What was Winston Churchill?" in *Essays in English History* (Pelican Books, 1976), p.306.

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