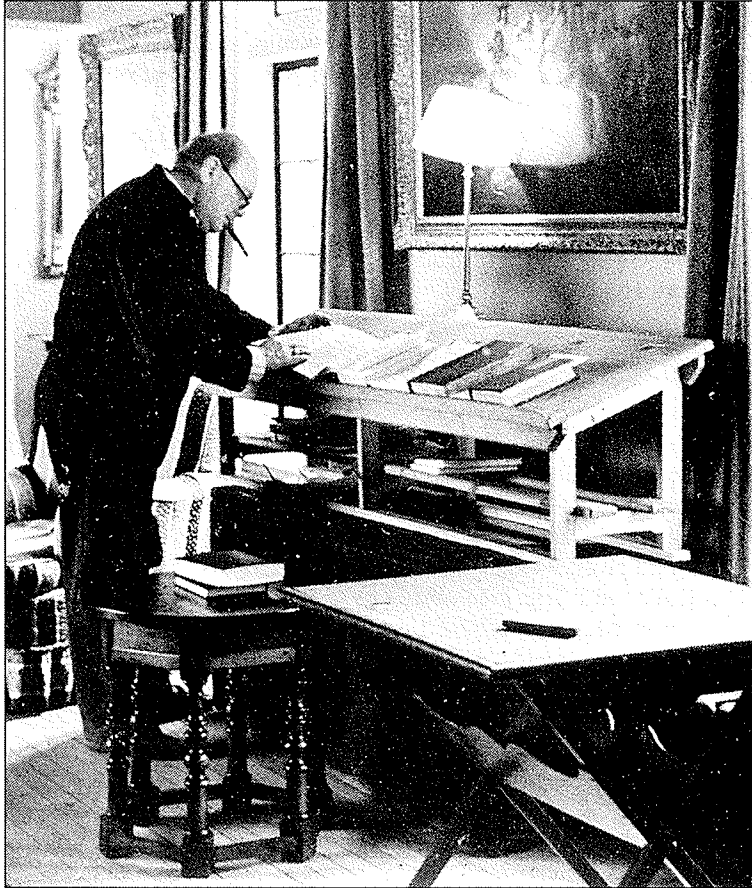


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# CHURCHILL THE WRITER



*Winston Churchill's political accomplishments alone inspire awe, yet he was also a prolific author, writing history as he made it, with a sweeping view and bold judgments. He capped his literary career with a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953. Because Churchill thought through so many political problems in his books, James W. Muller writes here, they provide a window into the mind of this extraordinary statesman.*

BY JAMES W. MULLER

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**T**he years have been kind to the memory of Winston Churchill. Half a century has passed since his rousing rule of Britain during World War II, and while he still has his critics, and against them his defenders, the controversies that attended his career are muted or stilled now. Since the war, the empire he cherished has dissolved into a host of sovereign nations, and John Bull himself has had to swallow hard and learn to be a good European. Seen against such changes, Churchill's Britain looks all the more resplendent. When we survey his nation's story, nothing has happened since his time to gainsay his hope that the Battle of Britain might prove its "finest hour," as he urged his countrymen to make it in one of his war-time speeches.

The recollection of those speeches, once a common bond among citizens in the English-speaking countries, has now become the privilege of the old. In a new age of spin doctors, ghostwriters, and media experts who adroitly trump up mediocrities into national figures, Churchill's invocation of our common liberty and his mastery of the English tongue have an aura of antique virtue about them. We hardly expect our politicians to equal his style of politics, but in case they surprise us we call them Churchillian.

Yet in coming to grips with Churchill's achievement, we cannot avail ourselves of the expedient by which modern men, as long ago as Montesquieu and Rousseau, excused themselves from imitating the valor of the ancients: supposing that the ancients were more than men. For Churchill lived in our century, died in 1965, and fought our wars or those of our parents or grandparents. Some among us remember him still, while for the rest he springs to life in the lifeless memory of modern electronics, which is notoriously unreceptive to the divine. There appears to be no doubt that he was a man like us.

As prime minister during World War II, Churchill wanted the new generation to ponder afresh the possibilities of greatness. A week before Christmas in the stern days of

1940, he paid the first of his annual visits to Harrow, his old school, where students ended the Michaelmas term by gathering to sing the songs he had once praised as "the greatest treasure that Harrow possesses." He joined in the singing with an uncanny memory for the words he had learned half a century before. When the program ended, he asked the students to sing two more of the school songs. One of them, written by Edward E. Bowen in the year of Churchill's birth, was called "Giants":

There were wonderful giants of old,  
you know,  
There were wonderful giants of old;  
They grew more mightily, all of a row,  
Than ever was heard or told;  
All of them stood their six feet four,  
And they threw to a hundred yards  
or more,  
And never were lame, or stiff, or sore;  
And we, compared to the days of yore,  
Are cast in a pigmy mould,  
For all of we,  
Whoever we be,  
Come short of the giants of old, you see.

The song goes on to describe "splendid cricketeers" and "scholars of marvellous force" among those giants, whose feats gymnastic and academic are daunting and unmatched. Yet the final verse of the song offers the boys an entirely different message:

But I think all this is a lie, you know,  
I think all this is a lie;  
For the hero-race may come and go,  
But it doesn't exactly die!  
For the match we lose and win it again,  
And a Balliol comes to us now and then,  
And if we are dwarfing in bat and pen,  
Down to the last of the Harrow men,  
We will know the reason why!  
For all of we,  
Whoever we be,  
Come up to the giants of old, you see.

The prime minister and old Harrovian then remarked that the boys had been singing of

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the "wonderful giants of old," but he asked them if anyone could "doubt that this generation is as good and as noble as any the nation has ever produced, and that its men and women can stand against all tests." There appeared to him no room and no excuse for shrinking.

On the other side of the ocean, accepting an honorary degree from Harvard University in September 1943, Churchill sounded a similar theme, bidding the students "remember that we are on the stage of history, and that whatever our station may be, and whatever part we have to play, great or small, our conduct is liable to be scrutinized not only by history but by our own descendants."

It is probably some longing for contact with what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature," in both our statesmen and ourselves, that encourages readers to embark upon long books about Churchill. Longest of all—indeed the longest biography ever written, and indispensable for studying Churchill—is the eight-volume official life begun by Churchill's son, Randolph, and recently completed by Martin Gilbert.\* The distinguished Oxford University historian tells the story so carefully, and obtrudes so little, that he allows the reader almost to reconstruct Churchill's life day by day in its richness and unexpected texture. Those who prefer a less austere narrator may turn to the three-volume life by William Manchester, *The Last Lion* (1983–), which would seem a very long work if not for the contrast with the official biography. Legions of readers have devoured its first two volumes and eagerly await the third. Different as they are in their approaches, the

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\*Randolph S. Churchill wrote the first two volumes of *Winston S. Churchill* (1966–88) and Martin Gilbert wrote the remaining six. There are also 14 companion volumes of documents, with another nine volumes planned.

two biographies, while not uncritical, are both admiring.

The reader who scrutinizes what Churchill used to call "the reverse of the medal" will find no dearth of debunkers, including most recently John Charmley's *Churchill: The End of Glory—A Political Biography* (1993). The critics raise questions about Churchill's long career that must be tackled by defenders not content to rest with the sort of picture that Parson Weems long ago drew of George Washington. Yet the parson's school of biography, despite its shortcomings, satisfies the curiosity of ordinary readers better than do the biographies that follow current academic fashion and whittle great men and women down to modest proportions. The discovery that the Father of His Country sported false teeth, however gratifying to a leveling spirit that resents his high reputation, adds little or nothing to an understanding of his achievements.

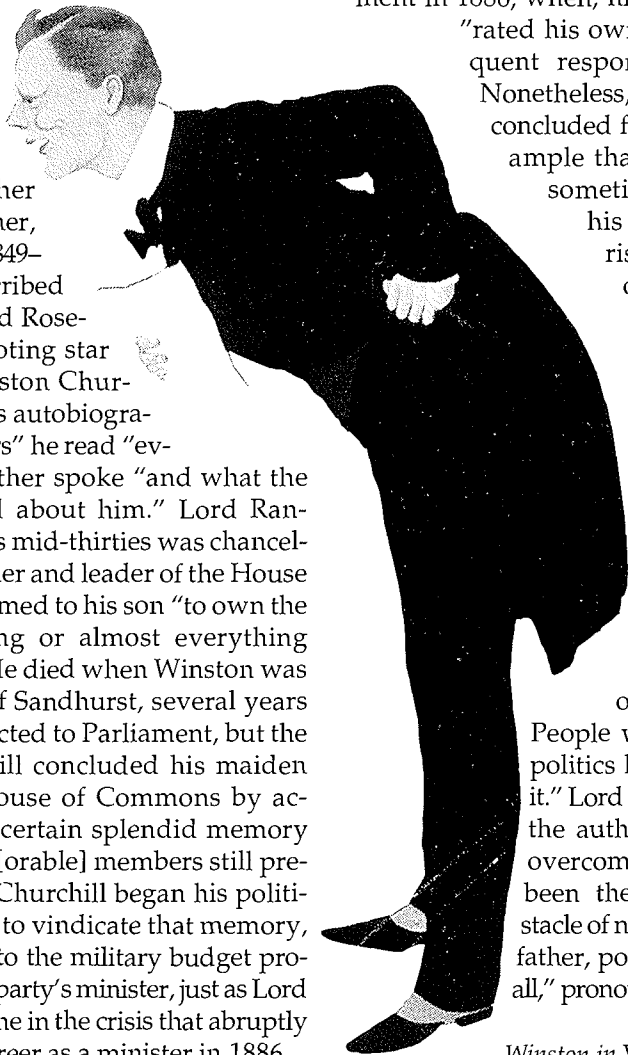
Accordingly, most readers have little use for the debunking kind of history, except if somebody deserves to be debunked; but then they may be less interested in reading about the person. In Churchill's case they have a settled view that he was equal to his reputation. That he or members of his family had ordinary human failings, as some recent books have charged, misses the main point. Readers are drawn to him not because he was an ordinary mortal but because they sense that he was somehow larger than life—as the young André Maurois saw when he was posted to his battalion during the Great War and came to think of Alcibiades as "Winston Churchill, without the hats." People read about Churchill with the same fascination that Maurois felt as he observed him in person: in hopes of peering round the curtain that separates a middling life from one that is grand, or of profiting from Churchill's example, or at least of

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James W. Muller is professor of political science at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. He is studying Churchill's writings under a Fellowship for College Teachers from the National Endowment for the Humanities. This essay is drawn from his forthcoming book, *The Education of Winston Churchill*. Copyright © 1994 by James W. Muller.

being warmed and heartened by it. His very faults and foibles, which have come in for their own share of attention, command interest as the peculiarities of a magnanimous man. Not that one can achieve Churchillian stature simply by smoking his trademark cigars or sipping Pol Roger champagne. But the advice once offered by the British embassy in Washington to a solicitous host is as instructive now as it was then: "Mr. Churchill's tastes are very simple," since "he is easily pleased with the best of everything."

To hold up Churchill's life as exemplary and worthy of study is to borrow a leaf from his own book. Winston himself sought instruction in the career of another Churchill, his father, Lord Randolph (1849–95), who was described by his friend Lord Rosebery as "the shooting star of politics." Winston Churchill tells us in his autobiography that "for years" he read "every word" his father spoke "and what the newspapers said about him." Lord Randolph, who by his mid-thirties was chancellor of the exchequer and leader of the House of Commons, seemed to his son "to own the key to everything or almost everything worth having." He died when Winston was 20 and just out of Sandhurst, several years before he was elected to Parliament, but the younger Churchill concluded his maiden speech in the House of Commons by acknowledging "a certain splendid memory which many hon[orable] members still preserve." Winston Churchill began his political career aiming to vindicate that memory, taking exception to the military budget proposed by his own party's minister, just as Lord Randolph had done in the crisis that abruptly ended his own career as a minister in 1886.



Winston in Vanity Fair, 1911.

But the young parliamentarian soon embarked on a more thoroughgoing effort to appropriate the family inheritance. His chief work during his first few years in the House of Commons was writing the official biography of Lord Randolph, a project that he addressed with a single-mindedness startling to his gentlemanly circle. Published in 1906, the book was emphatically a political biography, eschewing his father's private life to examine his public career, and particularly his brief ascendancy in the mid-1880s. The climax of the book is Lord Randolph's resignation from Lord Salisbury's Tory government in 1886, when, his son wrote, he had "rated his own power and consequent responsibility too high." Nonetheless, Winston Churchill concluded from his father's example that a statesman must sometimes diverge from his party, even at the risk of sacrificing his office.

As the (London) *Times Literary Supplement* advised its readers in its review of *Lord Randolph Churchill* (1906), "No one who cares for politics will willingly put it down when it is once in his hands. People who do not care for politics had better not touch it." Lord Rosebery, noting that the author had managed to overcome what might have been the "insuperable" obstacle of not having "known his father, politically speaking, at all," pronounced it "a fascinating

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book, one to be marked among the first dozen, perhaps the first half-dozen, biographies in our language."

**T**he biography was reprinted in 1952, with a new preface describing Lord Randolph's Tory Democracy as a harbinger of the democratic revolution of the 20th century. Winston Churchill's fascination with his father was as durable as the book. From the time he was at Harrow he followed Lord Randolph's speeches, which he used to learn by heart from the newspapers: The father's astonishing memory was replicated in the son. Winston Churchill learned from his father's power as an orator, from his insistence that the Tories embrace the new democratic electorate, and from his difficulty cleaving to a party line. He used to visit Lord Rosebery in the old statesman's latter years because he loved to hear him talk about Lord Randolph. It made up in some measure for the conversations he had never had with his father. Afterward, when he wrote his autobiography in the 1930s, he revised his explanation of his father's fall from power, attributing it to the nation's wish for "quiet times" and "political repose." He might later have written the same about his own fall from power in 1945.

After World War II, at the urging of his son and daughters, Churchill set down on paper what he called a "private article" that had begun as a reverie at the dinner table. In it, he imagines that Lord Randolph reappears on a November afternoon in his son's studio at his Chartwell estate. Asking what has become of the world in 1947, Lord Randolph is astonished to hear of Britain's experience of socialist governments, women's suffrage, and especially the world wars. He also asks about his son, who explains that he supports himself and his family by writing "books and articles for the Press." With delicious irony, Winston Churchill forbears to mention his own political career. Lord Randolph, who in life was doubtful of his son's prospects, is nonetheless impressed with his evident political acumen

and admits that he "never expected" him to "develop so far and so fully." He wonders why Winston "didn't go into politics," telling him, "You might have done a lot to help. You might even have made a name for yourself." Thereupon he vanishes, and the story ends. After putting this "private article" in a drawer for a decade, Winston Churchill made some final revisions in the late 1950s and then willed it to his wife. It was published posthumously in 1966 as "The Dream."

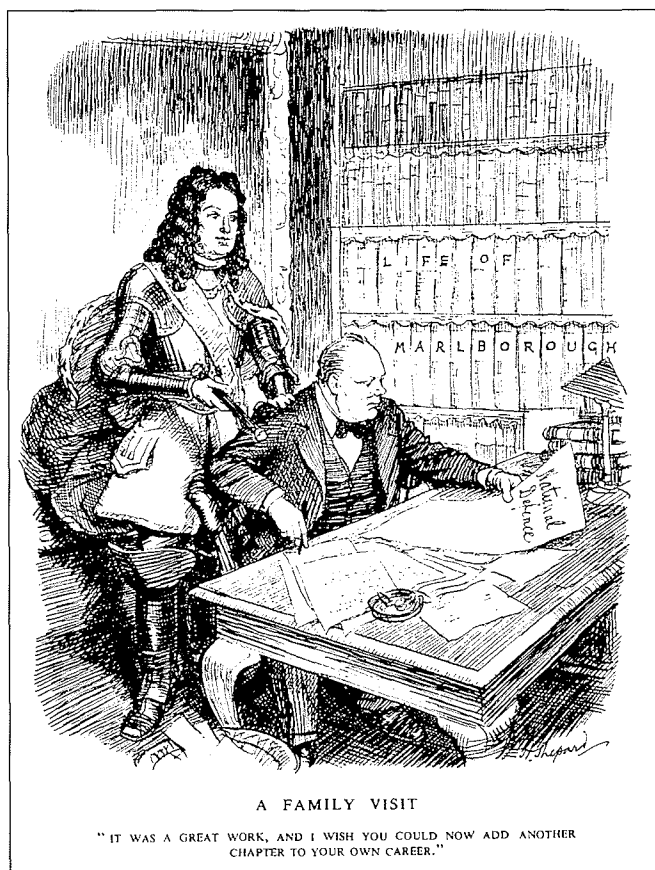
**Y**et Lord Randolph was not the only Churchill who served as a model for Winston. His meteoric success in the late 19th century had burnished the gleam on a name that had been pre-eminent in England for generations. Looming far above Lord Randolph in the family story was the first Winston Churchill's son John, mastermind of the Grand Alliance against King Louis XIV at the beginning of the 18th century. Serving his sovereign as both minister and captain-general, he bested the French in four great battles during the War of the Spanish Succession. For his service to the nation he was made the first Duke of Marlborough by a grateful Queen Anne, who arranged to build the palace near Oxford that took its name from his victory at Blenheim. In that monument to the glory of his ancestor Winston Churchill was born in 1874, and there he made his proposal of marriage to Clementine Hozier in 1908. From childhood he read everything he "came across" about Marlborough, and even before he was elected to Parliament, his evident literary talent attracted a publisher's proposal that he should write the duke's biography. But the idea was put off by the Boer War—Churchill dashed off, handsomely paid, to cover it for the *Morning Post*—and afterward by a more durable obstacle.

Churchill's reading had shown him the greatness of Marlborough, yet he had also read of the duke's coming of age in a dissolute court, of his treachery to several sovereigns, and of his notorious avarice. With the rest of his generation, Churchill had learned modern

history from the great Whig historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, whose *History of England from the Accession of James II* (1849–61) depicted Churchill's ancestor as an exemplary villain. Despite his undoubted talents and abilities, Macaulay's Marlborough was a man who carried selfishness, bad faith, and mendacity to the highest pitch. Churchill had an even closer bond with the Victorian writer than most of his contemporaries: His earliest triumph at school had been his faultless recitation of Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1846), and his reading of Macaulay when he was a young officer in India during the late 1890s had helped form his prose style. With a pang Churchill had discovered the historian's judgment of his ancestor, and for years it put him off writing the life of Marlborough. At length he learned to see the story differently. Over lunch with Lord Rosebery, the last obstacle was removed. His father's friend told him of a little known,

out-of-print book by John Paget that vindicated Marlborough against the charge of betraying his countrymen's descent on the French coast in 1694. Churchill was so pleased with Paget's refutation of Macaulay that he wrote a new preface and arranged for Paget's book to be republished in 1934. Paget helped him to the conclusion that Macaulay's aspersions on Marlborough's conduct and character were unjustified, thus clearing the way for the great biography of his ancestor to which Churchill devoted so much energy in the 1930s.

If writing the life of his father was the cornerstone of his political education, marking the era when he readied himself to hold ministerial office, then writing the life of Marlborough was the capstone, marking the era when he readied himself for the supreme



A Punch cartoon, 1938.

trials of his wartime prime ministry. Keeping his distance from the murky irresolution of Tory governments during his "wilderness years" between 1929 and 1939, Churchill immersed himself in the political history of the 18th century. Enjoying ready access to the first duke's papers at Blenheim Palace, visiting his battlefields on the Continent, and testing ideas in conversation with research assistants from Oxford, he grew more deeply appreciative of Marlborough's clairvoyance as strategist, diplomat, statesman, and servant of the crown.

In his biography, Churchill traced his ancestor's service to five sovereigns, from Charles II to George I. He studied Marlborough's deft abandonment of James II in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, his victories on behalf of William III, and, above all, his lead-

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ership of the allied coalition against the French in the age of Anne. As captain-general, Marlborough never fought a battle he did not win, and Churchill pondered his military genius. As prime minister in all but name through most of Anne's reign, Marlborough balanced the different interests of domestic parties and foreign allies, breaking the power of Louis XIV before his own enemies at court secured the duke's fall at the end of 1711. Marlborough's successes and travails in forming a national government and an international alliance to defeat a Continental tyrant would later prove instructive to his descendant in the struggle against Hitler. Churchill's *Marlborough, His Life and Times* (1933–38) is generally acknowledged to be his literary masterpiece. Its four volumes have been called "the greatest historical work written in our century," which opens for its reader, as it did for its author, "an inexhaustible mine of political wisdom and understanding."

**T**hus, to understand what Churchill was, one must read not only the books *about* him but also the books *by* him. This brief account of the two biographies that Churchill wrote, to which one might add several dozen brief lives he limned in *Great Contemporaries* (a book of essays published in 1935), may suffice to introduce his shelfful of books. Everyone knows that Churchill saved Britain in the war against Hitler; yet his leadership in the Battle of Britain was only what the Greeks might have called the *aristeia*, or crowning deed, in a long and varied life. Aside from his political career, Churchill was also a precocious, talented, and voluminous writer. Beginning with five books he wrote before entering Parliament at 25, his writing career spanned six decades, culminating with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953. Sorted for display in a bookstore, his works would greet the reader on many different shelves because of the variety of his subjects. In addition to his autobiography and collected speeches (standard works for a politician, honed to an uncommon standard by

Churchill), he wrote a political novel, eyewitness accounts of three Victorian wars, an east-African travelogue, multivolume histories of the two world wars, the two great biographies and many shorter sketches, political and philosophical essays, and his four-volume *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956–58). Almost all of his books were best-sellers. Some have never gone out of print, and many have recently been reprinted both in Britain and in the United States. In 1974, to mark the centenary of his birth, his books were collected into a 34-volume set, and a selection of his essays filled four volumes more.

**H**ow Churchill's manner of writing diverges from contemporary historiography may be gathered from the two biographies. Where the contemporary historian modestly aims to make a contribution to his field, Churchill frankly aspires to write books that will hold their own against all comers for several generations, or longer. Where the current historian shrinks from making judgments on questions of politics and morals, sidestepping controversy to fetch up on the barren country of mere fact, Churchill the writer pronounces and argues in the same manner as a practical man of state. Where the contemporary historian neglects politics and war to uncover the underlying causes of human affairs in sociology, economics, or psychology, Churchill cleaves to political and military history, arguing that politics and war are most important. Where the contemporary historian cautiously circumscribes a subject, writing a specialist monograph to illumine a little corner of the field, Churchill boldly broadens his subject to take in the whole human experience. Finally, where the current historian is content to write for a small circle of fellow specialists, Churchill offers his work to a large audience of lay readers.

Perhaps Churchill's approach and method strike academic specialists as off-hand or old-fashioned; perhaps the grandeur of his prose diverts us from the perspicuity of his thought; perhaps we are simply loath to grant

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## Reading Churchill

The best start for reading Churchill is his autobiography *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (1930, reprinted 1987), which rivals Mark Twain for adventure and good humor.

Of the works that Churchill wrote before he was elected to Parliament, most impressive is *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan* (1899). Unfortunately, only this rare two-volume first edition published by Longmans, Green, and Company has the complete text and the full flavor of his exuberant narration.

Though Churchill's early novel has its flaws (he tells us in *My Early Life* that he "consistently urged his friends to abstain from reading it"), the reader who seeks an appreciation of his prescience and detachment should ignore his advice and read *Savrola: A Tale of the Revolution in Laurania* (1900, reprinted 1976). After all, Churchill himself arranged in the 1950s for the book to be republished. Prowlers in used bookstores should beware lest they pick up novels by the American Winston Churchill (1871–1947), a popular novelist and sometime politician who has no relation to the English statesman, though the two once met for dinner in Boston: *Savrola* was the only novel that the English Winston

Churchill wrote. His mature philosophical musings are in *Thoughts and Adventures* (1932, reprinted 1991), originally published in the United States as *Amid These Storms*.

The 20th-century events that Churchill observed and superintended are retold with gripping immediacy in *The World Crisis*, 5 vols. (1923–31, abridged ed. 1992) and *The Second World War*, 6 vols. (1948–54, reprinted 1986). Churchill's great biographies are *Lord Randolph Churchill*, 2 vols. (1906) and *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, 4 vols. (1933–38), neither of which is currently in print. *Marlborough*, which shows Churchill's grasp of politics and his narrative power at their best, also exists in an abridged edition. The reader whose time is cut into small pieces might opt instead for Churchill's brief lives in *Great Contemporaries* (1935), reprinted as recently as 1991 but once again out of print.

The reader with no time at all might scour books of quotations, which Churchill himself commended in *My Early Life*: "The quotations when engraved upon the memory give you good thoughts. They also make you anxious to read the authors and look for more." In most such books Churchill's own good thoughts cover page after page.

that a practical politician could also excel as a scholar and historian. Whatever the reasons, Churchill's books, though always popular with the general reader, have been neglected by scholars. Those who do consult them approach them warily, fearing lest they be ensnared by special pleading, as in the biographical vindications of his ancestors, or by personal apology, as in his memoirs of the world wars. To a historian trained in impartiality, it is startling to realize that Churchill recounts Marlborough's early experience as a courtier in order to teach a lesson in political morality: not only how, but also when and why, one may rightly desert one's king. To a political scientist trained to consider political

debate as no more than a cover for a contest of force, it is hard to grant that there might be more to Churchill's defense in *The World Crisis* (1923–31) of the Dardanelles campaign—which cost him his post as first lord of the Admiralty in 1915—than simply an attempt to rescue his own falling political star.

Certainly his books were written with an eye to a particular political situation. Churchill himself disclaims his works as impartial historiography, putting the reader properly on guard. Yet scholars have too quickly dismissed his unfamiliar approach as illegitimate, and the ground of their complaint may more properly be turned against them. Of Churchill's books it might be said, as it was of the



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## A Sampler

*It is no doubt true that he rated his own power and consequent responsibility too high. Like many a successful man before him—and some since—he thought the forces he had directed in the past were resident in himself, whereas they were to some extent outside himself and independent.*

—Lord Randolph Churchill (1906)

*I have made or implied no criticism of any decision or action taken or neglected by others, unless I can prove that I had expressed the same opinion in writing before the event. . . . [T]he whole story is recorded as it happened, by the actual counsels offered and orders given in the fierce turmoil of each day. . . . Nothing of any consequence was done by me by word of mouth.*

—The World Crisis (1923)

*I always loved cartoons. At my private school at Brighton there were three or four volumes of cartoons from Punch, and on Sundays we were allowed to study them. This was a very good way of learning history, or at any rate of learning something.*

—Thoughts and Adventures (1932)

*Battles are the principal milestones in secular history. Modern opinion resents this uninspiring truth, and historians often treat the decisions of the field as incidents in the dramas of politics and diplomacy. But great battles, won or lost, change the entire course of events, create new standards of values, new moods, new atmospheres, in armies and in nations, to which all must conform.*

—Marlborough: His Life and Times (1937)

*Whatever one may think about democratic government, it is just as well to have practical experience of its rough and slatternly foundations. No part of the education of a politician is more indispensable than the fighting of elections. Here you come into contact with all sorts of persons and every current of national life. You feel the Constitution at work in its primary processes. Dignity may suffer, the superfine gloss is soon worn away; nice particularisms and special private policies are scraped off; much has to be accepted with a shrug, a sigh or a smile; but at any rate in the end one knows a good deal about what happens and why.*

—Great Contemporaries (1935)

man himself, that you see all their faults at first blush and spend your life discovering their hidden virtues. In forsaking the inhibitions that make much 20th-century historiography sterile and lifeless, Churchill did not simply play to the crowd. He also adopted an ap-

proach to history more akin to those of Gibbon and Macaulay, whom he took and studied as models, than to the emerging fashion in historical writing. In Hegel's terms, he resuscitated original history—history as written by its participants—even though it was supposed to be dead and buried. Churchill brings to life the choices faced by political leaders, which gives his books the same immediacy and interest that animate Thucydides' history. The Englishman might have borrowed his purpose from the Athenian, who meant his book to be "a possession for all time."

Every biographer has drawn upon Churchill's books, which offer a source as unavoidable as it is attractive. Yet in a way the writings have been slighted even by the Churchill scholars. Biographers are drawn to Churchill's accomplishments in politics and war. They fit his books into their account of his deeds, treating them mostly as projects that occupied time and energy, and earned money, but slighting his absorption in them and their importance as a window on his soul.

Several theories have been advanced to explain Churchill's motive for writing. There is some truth to the claim that his books owed their being to his wish to live like a lord without inherited wealth, a desire that forced him to live from pen to mouth. Indeed, Churchill took pride in his ability to support his family by his writings; even in his youth he commanded record-breaking royalties. After the

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Great War he declared at a party that it was “very exhilarating to feel that one was writing for half a crown a word!” His chief motive for the ephemeral newspaper pieces he frankly called “pot boilers” may have been pecuniary, but the money motive hardly suffices to account for his grander and more enduring works. Most biographers have only a superficial understanding of Churchill’s writings because they fail to see past this obvious but inadequate explanation.

**T**here is more evidence for the claim that Churchill wrote to put his name before the public. In the summer of 1897, as a green subaltern in the Fourth Hussars, he wrote to his mother from the Indian frontier that he had ridden his “grey pony all along the skirmish line where everyone else was lying down in cover. Foolish perhaps but I play for high stakes and given an audience there is no act too daring or too noble.” But he was playing to an audience larger than merely his brother officers. He was disappointed that autumn when his war dispatches were published unsigned, since it had been his design (in his 23rd year) to bring his “personality before the electorate.” The publication of the dispatches as his first book soon thereafter allowed him to put his name forward. (He had not yet attained the ironic reticence that charms the reader of “The Dream.”) That so many of his published works are autobiographical—from his early novel *Savrola* (1900) to his histories of the two world wars, the first of which Arthur Balfour called Churchill’s “autobiography disguised as a history of the universe”—lends credence to the view that he wrote to raise his own banner.

Or perhaps also to defend it. In Churchill’s description of his father’s estrangement from the Tory leadership, many discerned an attempt to justify his own departure from the party in 1904. (He joined the Liberals, but gradually returned to the Tories during the 1920s.) His epic history of World War I, with its pivot on the Dardanelles campaign, may be

considered an attempt to vindicate his conduct of the Admiralty against his critics. Churchill himself wrote to his wife that the book was “a g[rea]t chance to put my whole case in an agreeable form to an attentive audience.” In 1946, the year after the fall of his government, Churchill explained in a letter to his successor, Clement Attlee, that he was writing his memoirs as an explanation and defense of his “conduct of affairs” during World War II. Critical accounts of his prime ministry published immediately after the war whetted his appetite to set the record straight, and, as his literary assistant William Deakin later told Martin Gilbert, Churchill thought of the memoirs “as his monument.”

**T**hat remark suggests that Churchill’s writings had a purpose beyond the assistance they might give his political career, that he sought through his books to attain not just fame or the good opinion of his contemporaries but a kind of immortality. Even as a young man he was acutely conscious of the shortness of a mortal life, an awareness perhaps heightened by his father’s death in his 46th year and his own premonition—fortunately not borne out—that he too would die young. He was fully aware that a statesman’s fame depends only at first on his reputation among his contemporaries and later on the judgment of historians. He admired the serenity of Marlborough, who never wrote an account of his achievements but relied on his victories, and the noble monument of Blenheim Palace, to preserve his name. Yet he knew that his ancestor’s glory had been tarnished by the historians until his descendant came along to defend him. To write history himself, or to make at least a contribution to history, was therefore for Winston Churchill a way of seeking a more lasting vindication.

But the novel that he wrote as a young soldier in India—the first book he undertook, though not the first work he published—casts doubt on the sufficiency of that explanation as well. Its hero is the young statesman Savrola, who leads a popular revolution against the

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military dictator in the imaginary nation of Laurania, whose shores are lapped by the Mediterranean. Savrola is an honorable man with a splendid gift for oratory, but behind him is a rude and unruly democratic party often stirred by less savory leaders. Uneasily coexisting with Savrola's ambition is a contempt for what Churchill later called the "rough and slatternly foundations" of democracy. Like Churchill, he is a reflective man—a reader of history and philosophy. His study is strewn with many of the books that Churchill read while his brother officers slept away the long Indian afternoons: works by Schopenhauer, Kant, Hegel, St. Simon, Johnson, Zola, Gibbon, Boccaccio, Darwin, Plato, Thackeray, Lecky, and Macaulay, as well as the Bible.

**E**ven if his purpose had been strictly practical, to plumb these books for their political intelligence, Churchill would have assembled here a remarkably meaty, if idiosyncratic collection. So all-embracing was his ambition that he was unwilling to leave such serious books to the "Senior Wranglers" at the universities. In fact, he might have gone to Oxford himself when he returned from India in 1899, except that he "could not contemplate toiling at Greek irregular verbs after having commanded British regular troops." Even without formal training, however, Churchill gave himself a remarkable education. Not every aspiring parliamentarian would have devoured volume after volume of the *Annual Register*, making notes on debates that took place decades ago and deciding what his own position would have been, before taking his seat in the House of Commons in 1901. His study of history and philosophy, culminating in his reading of Plato's *Republic*, was still more unusual. Churchill's writing was rooted in the same desire as his

reading: a yearning to answer the great questions of politics and philosophy for himself.

To live with the dozens of books that Churchill wrote is to be reminded forcefully that the man who fascinates historians was more than a politician. His friends were surprised by Churchill's ability to turn away from the urgent affairs of state to his writing. His capacity for detachment from the world of human affairs was also attested by his love affair with painting, ably and lovingly described by his daughter Mary Soames in *Winston Churchill: His Life As a Painter* (1990). As Churchill tells us himself in his essay "Painting as a Pastime" (1921–22), "One is quite astonished to find how many things there are in the landscape, and in every object in it, one never noticed before. And this is a tremendous new pleasure and interest which invests every walk or drive with an added object. . . . I think this heightened sense of observation of Nature is one of the chief delights that have come to me through trying to paint." But in his novel he gives us another unmistakable sign of this detachment. At the height of the revolution, Savrola breaks away from politics to climb the stairs to his roof, where in a small observatory he trains his telescope upon the stars.

**T**his contemplative side to Churchill's hero, which springs from a sense of the insufficiency of human things and a yearning for things above us that are more enduring, belongs as well to Churchill. He tells us in *My Early Life* that "a man's Life must be nailed to a cross either of Thought or Action." As a man who held almost every important cabinet post in the British government in the course of his long political career, Churchill certainly chose the action of a political life. Yet his writings show that his choice was not so simple, for in them we see how reflective a political man may be.

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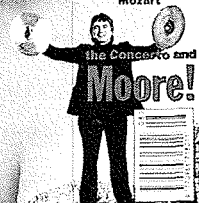
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