

# Churchill: Great and Mean

Geoffrey Wheatcroft

**No More Champagne: Churchill and His Money** by David Lough. Picador, 532 pp., \$32.00

**Clementine: The Life of Mrs. Winston Churchill** by Sonia Purnell. Viking, 436 pp., \$30.00

## 1.

In 1930, Winston Churchill published *My Early Life*, which remains his most likable and authentic book. At its end he comes forward to September 1908 when, without mentioning Clementine Hozier by name or his proposing to her at his ancestral home of Blenheim Palace, his last line tells us in fairy-tale fashion that "I married and lived happily ever afterwards." Their son Randolph also wrote a memoir, *Twenty-One Years*, an affable if flimsy account of his upbringing, published in 1965 just after his father died, which begins facetiously with his own birth in 1911 "to poor but honest parents."

Those parents rarely went to church in adult life, but Winston had a very repressive memory, in which much of the Bible lay buried from long boyhood hours in chapel at Harrow. He would echo its hallowed phrases, as when he called the 1930s his "wilderness years," impiously comparing himself with John the Baptist, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." That was the theme of *The Gathering Storm*, his best-selling if highly tendentious book published in 1948 as the first of the six volumes of *The Second World War*, which contains another echo of scripture, the passage from Ecclesiasticus that begins "Let us now praise famous men" and continues "Rich men furnished with ability, living peaceably in their habitations." Or as Churchill wrote about those pre-war years: "Thus I never had a dull or idle moment from morning till midnight, and with my happy family around me dwelt at peace within my habitation."

It would be hard to say which of these sundry Churchillian lines is the most far-fetched, or simply false. The "political wilderness" is a most misleading description of his decade of self-imposed (but very lucrative) exile from front-bench politics. At no time was Churchill ever "poor"—Randolph was born when his father was home secretary with a salary of £5,000, and income tax was only paid by those fewer than a million British citizens earning £160 a year or more—while readers of David Lough's hugely enjoyable and illuminating study of "Churchill and his money" may even ponder the word "honest." Then again, Sonia Purnell's informative new biography of Clementine reminds us that "my happy family around me" was tragically untrue. To borrow one more famous line, the Churchill family was unhappy in its own way.

"The only thing that worries me in life is—money," Winston told his brother Jack. "We shall finish up stone broke." That was in 1898, but he could have gone on saying it for more than

forty years to come. Until his sixties and his apotheosis as leader of his country, Churchill's income, however large, could never match his insatiable extravagance, and on more than one occasion he was broke to the point of imminent financial collapse. Lough is an Oxford history graduate with a long career behind him in financial services and private banking, and has never written a book until now. But he has struck a rich lode in the Churchill archives at Cambridge, with almost all of Churchill's bank statements, tax correspondence, and other financial papers, while Lough's background gives

him the great advantage over most academic historians that he actually understands money.

his life that he was an untrustworthy and unprincipled adventurer. Born in 1874 at Blenheim, the magnificent if slightly inhuman monument built for the first Duke of Marlborough, Churchill was a grandson of the seventh duke; all his life he was haunted by memories of grandeur, and yearned for his own. After serving as a cavalry subaltern and part-time war correspondent, he had published five books and amassed £10,000 by the time he was elected to Parliament in 1900 aged twenty-five. It was barely enough. As a young bachelor MP he spent very freely on everything from polo ponies

to wine to cigars, which alone cost him a monthly £13 (more than a laborer's wages), although "cost him" didn't mean paying: he was always years behind with his cigar merchant's accounts, as with those of every other tradesman.

His first substantial (though far from reliable) book was his biography of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill. Churchill's improbable agent was Frank Harris, now recalled mainly as a philandering bounder thanks to his lubricious memoirs. "Properly worked this book should bring you in £10,000 or I'm a Dutchman!" Harris told his young client, and he managed to get £8,000. Marriage only added more demands, and by the end of 1913 Churchill had a bank overdraft of £2,740, other loans of £3,000, and at least £2,000 in unpaid bills, considerably more in total than his salary. By the time Churchill angrily resigned in November 1915 after the debacle in Gallipoli for which he was partially responsible, his money problems were acute, and when he returned to ministerial office in 1917 he was harried by tax demands. With current income never sufficing to meet his obligations, he borrowed more and more heavily: by 1920 he owed his bank more than £20,000.

His expedient was to take on further work, in particular *The World Crisis*, his highly personal account of the Great War. Along with London and New York publishers and another £5,000 for serial rights from *The Times*, after Churchill demanded not one but

two assurances from its editor that the paper wouldn't criticize the Gallipoli campaign, he made £25,000 from the book. But he still needed more. In January 1921 his distant cousin Lord Herbert Vane-Tempest was killed in a railway accident. Thanks to a chain of inheritance whose convolutions would have delighted Trollope, Churchill now came into the Garron Tower estate in County Antrim.

Ever the optimist, and fortified by this legacy, he bought Chartwell in Kent as a family home. Clementine rightly thought they couldn't afford it, although she had no idea how the cost would run wildly out of hand. Within two years £18,000 had been spent on renovation, and "Churchill decided not to share the news with Clementine that Knight Frank & Rutley [the estate agents] had just valued the property at only £12,000." In the end, the purchase and rebuilding of Chartwell would cost £40,000, three times the original estimate and far more than its market value.

In general, Lough's book is richly detailed and accurate, as well as hair-raisingly enjoyable, but there is one error that needs to be corrected before it becomes ineradicable: it has appeared at least twice recently in the *TLS*. "The prime minister Lloyd George summoned Churchill and other British ministers," he writes, "in January 1920 to Versailles, where he was taking part in negotiations to establish a peace treaty." There was no conference at Versailles. There was a peace conference in Paris, mostly conducted at the Quai d'Orsay, where the victorious allies drew up treaties that were then accepted by—or imposed upon—the defeated powers, and signed at various palaces in the environs of the city: after the Versailles Treaty with Germany came the more punitive treaties of St.-Germain with Austria, Trianon with Hungary, and Sèvres with Turkey.

In late 1924 the Tories returned to office under Stanley Baldwin while Churchill returned sheepishly to the Tories, whom he had deserted twenty years before, and was made chancellor of the exchequer, an office for which his private financial life might have suggested he was more than usually ill-equipped. Still painfully late with his tax liabilities, the chancellor did not scruple to approach directly Sir Richard Hopkins, the chairman of the Inland Revenue, who was technically his subordinate, for a private discussion about his personal tax problems. Over the years Churchill regularly rotated from "author by profession" for tax purposes, to cessation from that status during public service, then resumption again. But during periods of cessation he was precluded from taking on more books and journalism, which was the only way he could pay his large existing tax bills. He was on a treadmill that was also a trap.

After the Baldwin government lost office at the May 1929 general election, Churchill made a luxurious tour of North America at the expense of rich acquaintances. He was captivated by American stock market mania. "There is a stock exchange in every big hotel,"



Winston Churchill and his daughter Sarah laying bricks at their house in Chartwell, Kent, September 1928

Davis/Topical Press Agency/Getty Images



he delightedly told Clementine, who may have been less delighted. "You go and sit and watch the figures being marked up on slates every few minutes." In one four-day period his own turnover reached \$200,000, mostly in quick in-and-outs.

He reached New York in October just as the market began to totter, and he was homebound aboard the *Beren-garia* on October 29, "Black Tuesday," when it plummeted. He suffered extremely heavy losses in the crash, "an episode curiously omitted from his official biography," as Lough drily observes. Churchill was now dependent on his friend Bernard Baruch, the New York financier, who took over his American investments on the enviable basis that he would cover losses while Churchill enjoyed any profits. Once again he could only raise money from journalism and books: his life of the great Marlborough and a history of "the English-speaking races."

Although Lough says that he makes no connection between what he has learned about Churchill's financial life and his political career, a reader may do so. In 1929, Churchill told Clementine:

I have made up my mind that if N. Ch. [Neville Chamberlain] is made leader of the C.P. [Conservative Party] or anyone else of that kind, I clear out of politics and see if I cannot make you & the kittens a little more comfortable before I die.

Chamberlain didn't become leader for another eight years, and Churchill didn't quit politics, but his "wilderness years" need to be understood in the light of the time and energy he devoted to making money, to the point that he could apologize almost comically to Keith Feiling, the Oxford don who was one of his advisers on *Marlborough*, that he was behind with writing since "I have been much burdened by politics."

By now Chartwell was a veritable word factory, with a team of researchers and ghostwriters, notably Edward Marsh, a fastidious civil servant and patron of the arts, and an obscure journalist, Adam Marshall Diston. Lord Riddell, owner of the *News of the World*, commissioned a series of "Great Stories of the Word Retold," from *Ben-Hur* to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, hackwork that Churchill awkwardly admitted was unsatisfactory in "artistic" terms, but paid £330 apiece, barely a tenth of which went to the ghostwriter. Riddell was shrewd enough to tell Churchill, "Copy to be written by you personally," at which, Lough informs us with a straight face, "Churchill immediately set his new ghost to work." I'd innocently assumed that, for example, at least the preface in my copy of Churchill's 1932 collection *Thoughts and Adventures* was by the great man, and not "rather a good pastiche!" as Diston justifiably boasted after writing it.

Throughout these interwar years Churchill regularly visited France to stay with the Duke of Westminster or Lord Beaverbrook, where he ate, drank, painted, and gambled. As Sonia Purnell reminds us, that was particularly hard on Clementine. Her carefully researched and readable biography in some ways updates the first and excellent life of Clementine published by

her daughter Mary Soames in 1979, but even now, Clementine remains an enigma. Highly intelligent as well as highly strung, often distant to the point of chilly, she was a far better judge of character than Churchill, and always suspicious of his shady entourage, F. E. Smith (Lord Birkenhead), Beaverbrook, and Brendan Bracken.

But she was not a successful mother. They had three daughters and a son before Churchill's second political *dé-gringolade* in 1922 with the fall of the Lloyd George government, but that had been foreshadowed by the personal tragedies of 1921. Churchill's mother Jennie died in June, and in August



Winston Churchill being helped off Aristotle Onassis's yacht *Christina* by Onassis (left) and Churchill's bodyguard Edmund Murray, August 1959

the Churchills' beloved youngest child Marigold, not yet three, died of septi-cemia contracted on seaside holiday. Clementine "screamed like an animal undergoing torture," and never quite got over her death, although Mary, born the following year, provided reconciliation and compensation. Before that, in the spring of 1921, Churchill had gone, accompanied by his wife, to the fateful Cairo conference where he redrew the map of the Middle East. Just after their return home, Clementine's brother Bill Hozier shot himself in a Paris hotel room, ruined by gambling.

And so her message to her husband "BEWARE CASINO" was written with feeling, although her advice was ignored as ever: on one occasion among many, Churchill withdrew 75,000 francs (then roughly £750 or \$3,700) from the bank at the local casino, and returned with 3,250 francs. That was in 1932, when Churchill's earnings of more than £15,000 gave him one of the ten thousand highest incomes in the country, but unfortunately lagged behind the £30,000 he managed to spend

in the year. The usual phrase here is "which in today's terms is..." and Lough does in fact give, as a running head at the top of each verso page, a factor for multiplying money from each period to now. But there are different ways of calculating changing values, and anyway money simply didn't mean the same to rich and poor.

More useful is to look at who earned what when. Through the 1930s, Churchill's annual income averaged more than £11,000. The dozen or so servants at Chartwell ranged from housemaids paid £1 a week to the chauffeur with £125 a year; a British industrial worker made annually between £150

distrusted and disliked politician to a superhuman hero—and the war transformed his finances also. When he became prime minister, he was still harried by creditors, publishers, and tax collectors, but on June 18, as the last British troops were fleeing France, he received £5,000 (tafflingly routed through Bracken) from the Austrian-born financier Sir Henry Strakosch. The next five years saw large royalties from Churchill's collected speeches, and then a bidding war between two émigré film producers, Sir Alexander Korda, for whom Churchill had written abortive screenplays before the war, and Filippo Del Giudice, ending with £50,000 each for movie rights to *Marlborough* and the unpublished, indeed unfinished, *English-Speaking Peoples* (neither was ever filmed).

Meantime Clementine became a heroine herself, visiting bombed-out towns and later, as head of Red Cross Aid to Russia, touring Russia. But family life was woeful. Randolph married the very young Pamela Digby, begot a son, and went off to Egypt leaving behind a disconsolate, though not inconsolable, wife. In her life of Clementine, Sonia Purnell doesn't stint the personal-as-political, describing a night at the Dorchester Hotel where Pamela helped an American visitor to "peel off her dress." And yet it's not without real historical significance that at the height of the war the American ambassador to the Court of St. James's was sleeping with the prime minister's daughter, and the president's special envoy was sleeping with the prime minister's daughter-in-law. Special relationships indeed.

The ambassador was Gil Winant, a former Republican governor of New Hampshire, a very popular replacement for the old monster Joseph Kennedy. He discreetly took up with Sarah, whose first marriage had petered out. The daughter-in-law, whose dress was peeled, was Pamela Churchill, and the peeler was Averell Harriman, whom Pamela would marry thirty years after that first night, during her own extraordinary career as the last great courtesan. But the romance of Winant and Sarah didn't last. He returned home after the war, wrote a memoir, but fell into melancholy and, on its publication day in 1947, shot himself. Altogether, a sharp dissonance emerges between Churchill as the jovial bulldog of popular American imagination and the somber reality of a life scarred by bitterness and tragedy: in all, suicides close to Churchill included a brother-in-law, a former stepfather, a daughter's estranged lover, a former daughter-in-law, a son-in-law, and a daughter.

In the postwar years Churchill wrote, or supervised the writing of, *The Second World War*. Huge sums were paid for it, but the obstacle was tax. He grumbled one American offer by grumbling that, on anything he now earned, "I would have to pay taxes of nineteen and six in the pound, so what's the use?" But a way around that top 97.5 percent marginal rate was soon found, thanks to the tax lawyer Charles Graham Dixon. He came up with a dodge of baroque ingenuity if classical simplicity, based on the legal fiction that publishers were acquiring Churchill's papers, rather than paying him as an author. And so of the £80,000 he made in the 1949-1950 tax year, he paid tax on only £5,000. No wonder that at Chartwell in April and May 1949, so far from

## 2.

In May 1940, Churchill was transmuted as if by some alchemy from a deeply

Topfoto/Art Images



"no more champagne," 454 bottles of it were consumed, along with fifty-eight of brandy, fifty-six of Black Label whisky, and sixty-nine of port.

His rather weird return to office in 1951 was not what was needed by the country, or Clementine, or Churchill himself if truth be told, and his last ten years after he finally retired from office in 1955 at the age of eighty are sorry to contemplate. There were more screaming fits from Randolph, still convinced that his parents had connived in his cuckolding (and he might have been right), and more trouble with the elder daughters. Their lives were blighted by alcoholic and amorous turmoil, culminating in Diana's suicide in 1963. It's no surprise that Clementine was hospitalized for depression.

### 3.

More than fifty years after this death, Churchill remains a problem. Despite very many books on him, ranging from the adulatory to the defamatory, not to say from the excellent to the execrable, the constitutional historian Vernon Bogdanor has said recently that even now there is still no satisfactory biography of Churchill. A starting point for the recent flowering of serious Churchill studies may have been the grand colloquy held in Austin in 1991, with the lectures published as an invaluable collection.\* In their introduction, the editors, William Roger Louis of the University of Texas and the late Robert Blake of Oxford, said something that is more relevant now than ever: "Such is the admiration for him, especially in the United States, that it sometimes seems difficult to separate the legendary figure from the man."

What's notable is that all the best recent books have dealt with specific aspects of him: Churchill as domestic politician, as rhetorician, as imperialist, as war leader; Churchill and Zionism, Churchill and the Bengal famine, Churchill and his war cabinet. And of course Churchill the writer, and his money: Lough's book completes a kind of triptych of splendid books. First came *In Command of History* by David Reynolds (2005), a study of the making of *The Second World War* with the purpose of vindication, as well as making money. Then in 2012 Peter Clarke, another Cambridge historian, published *Mr. Churchill's Profession*, a kind of prequel, describing Churchill's literary life until 1945.

With all these, Bogdanor is right. The great life of Churchill, to rank with John Röhl's three volumes on Kaiser Wilhelm II, or Robert Skidelsky's three on Keynes, or Robert Caro's incomparable—because there truly is nothing quite to compare it with!—four on Lyndon Johnson, is still to seek. There is the official *Winston S. Churchill* in eight volumes, begun by his son Randolph and completed by the late Sir Martin Gilbert, but that's a problem in itself. In 1968, less than three years after Sir Winston died, and after publishing (with considerable help) two barely adequate volumes, Randolph succeeded in drinking, smoking, and shouting himself to death at fifty-seven.

\*Churchill: *A Major New Assessment of His Life in Peace and War*, edited by Robert Blake and William Roger Louis (Norton, 1993).

From among his assistants or ghosts, Houghton Mifflin, the American publisher, chose Gilbert, who began work after fifteen tons of Churchill's papers were carried under police escort to the basement of the Bodleian Library. But he had accepted a fixed fee per volume, and this rapidly dwindled in the hyperinflation of the 1970s. The volumes came out at irregular intervals, while Gilbert produced other books to keep going. Everyone interested in Churchill is in his debt for amassing so much material in print, the invaluable documentary supplements as much as the main text.

But the book is more chronicle than biography, and it is notably uncritical. Gilbert unguardedly gave a hint of explanation in his own memoir, *In Search of Churchill* (1994), where he described

how he would take his book, chapter by chapter, to Clementine, now Lady Spencer-Churchill, and read it to her over luncheon. I've mentioned Caro's LBJ; those who know that remarkable work will find it very hard to imagine the author reading each chapter out loud to Lady Bird Johnson.

One of Churchill's greatest speeches in 1940, if now little remembered, was his tribute to Neville Chamberlain on November 12, which presented him with an obvious difficulty. He solved it beautifully, by paying sincere tribute to Chamberlain's longing for peace, and incidentally repudiating any notion of preemptive war. Thanks to Chamberlain,

we were guiltless of the bloodshed, terror and misery which

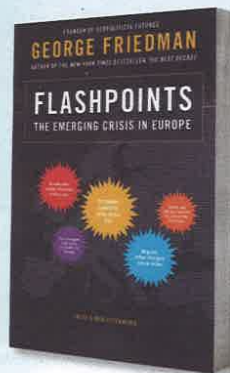
have engulfed so many lands and peoples.... Long, hard, and hazardous years lie before us, but at least we entered upon them united and with clean hearts.

Those are words that George W. Bush and Tony Blair could not possibly have used about the Iraq war.

Afterward, and in sardonic mode, Churchill told a colleague, "I said it one way, but I could have said it another." And that's just as true of anything said or written about Churchill himself. He abides still, a vast looming presence, defying the biographer, his greatness matched by his meanness, his nobility by his brutality, his courage by his rapacity; "the man of the century," and as elusive as ever. □

## Paradigm-Shifting Ideas

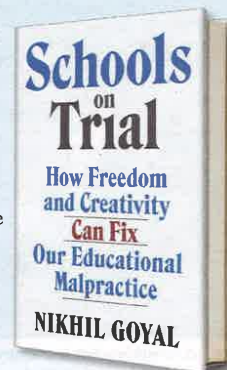
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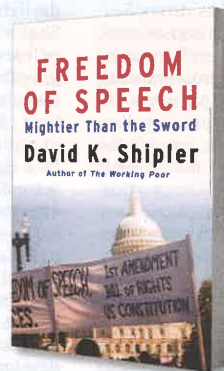
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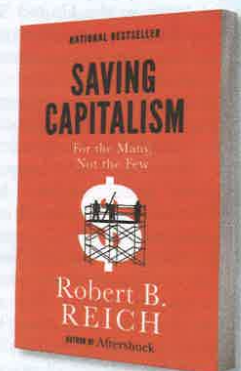
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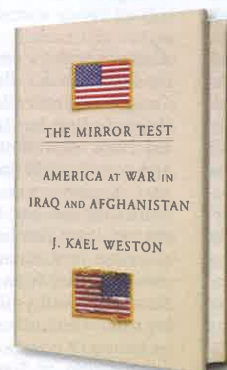
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