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JAHRGANGS (1969/70)

Churchill the Historian

F. W. Deakin

*3. Winston Churchill-Gedenkvorlesung, gehalten an der Universität Basel
am 10. Januar 1969.*

Churchill the Historian

*Third Winston Churchill Memorial Lecture, given in the University of Basel,
10th January 1969*

F. W. DEAKIN

Introduction

My task is a daunting one. The towering personality of Churchill cannot be divided into neat compartments. He touches life and its creative manifestations at all points. He was much addicted to the writing of history, not as a separate occupation or an agreeable form of relaxation, but to express and interpret, with the full powers of his formidable gifts, a vision of men and events as seen and ordered through the prism of a superb historical imagination.

Characteristically, Churchill never posed to himself the problem of the nature of history. To him it was not a subject, but the sum of things; of “recorded truths” to be grasped and reduced to an intelligible inner world. A philosophy of history was to him a contradiction in terms, a delight reserved to schoolmen, and to professors.

I had the privilege, granted to few, of working closely in his company for thirty years, assisting him with the construction of his historical writings. As a disciplined academic historian I shall endeavour to present you with a cool appraisal of Churchill’s contribution to the writing of history; but as one who surrendered without terms long ago to the magic of the man, I must ask you to bear with me, if, from time to time, a note of personal emotion intrudes into the formality of a university lecture.

I intend, in unfolding the subject of my address to you, to present an impressionistic historical survey of Churchill’s main works—quoting selectively but fully his own phrases and language—remaining myself, as it were, a watchful commentator in the wings.

Malakand Field Force

In the year 1898 a small volume was published in London entitled *The Story of the Malakand Field Force. An Episode of Frontier War*. The author

was a young cavalry lieutenant of the British army, attached as a press correspondent to a military operation launched in the previous year against hill tribes on the North-West Frontier of India. His name was Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill: he was just twenty-three years old, and this was his first work, written in five weeks, and his first bow before the public as an author. As he wrote to his mother: "The publication of the book will certainly be the most noteworthy act of my life." *The Malakand Field Force* was favourably received by the London press (although one reviewer commented that "it suggests in style a volume by Disraeli revised by a mad printer's reader"). But it was considered as a serious if modest contribution to military literature, as a record of a distant campaign on the frontiers of the Indian Empire, fought in the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the symbolic celebration of the British Imperial peace. As the young author expressed this climate of confident security: "The year 1897 in the annals of the British people, was marked by a declaration to the whole world of their faith in the higher destinies of their race."

This slim volume has long been forgotten and out of print (the second and only other edition was issued in pocket form in 1916) but it has its marked place not only as the first publication of a new writer, but for the light which it casts on the early formation of his peculiar historical vision and its expression in literary form.

To the young Winston Churchill, the craft of writing was his school, his university, the self-imposed training of his mind, and disciplining of his imagination. It was shaped with effort by lonely study, in Indian military camps, in stolen hours of leisure. He was deprived of the encouragement of teachers and confined by the limits of his own experience.

His self-education began in India in the winter of 1896, "riding triumphantly through Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* from end to end, and on to the *History of England* of Lord Macaulay who, with his captivating style and devastating self-confidence was the prince of literary rogues, who always preferred the tale to the truth, and smirched or glorified men and garbled documents according as they affected his drama".

His reading list widened daily: Plato, Aristotle, Darwin and "other books of lesser standing".

As he wrote in *My Early Life*—a later autobiographical sketch: "It was a curious education. First because I approached it with an empty hungry mind, and with fairly strong jaws, and what I got I bit; secondly because I had no one to tell me that 'This is discredited' . . . 'There is a much better book on the subject' and so forth. I now began, for the first time, to envy those young cubs at the university who had fine scholars to tell them what was what, professors who had devoted their lives to mastering and focussing ideas in every branch of learning: who were eager to distribute the

treasures they had gathered before they were overtaken by the night.” But each excursion into the world of thoughts must be tempered and related to that of action. The light of immediate personal experience—now of imperial wars of the last century—must be cast against the historical canvas of the past, sharpened by relation to the evidence and witness of others. Such were the structural elements of the young Churchill’s method, set with a striking precocity already in *The Malakand Field Force*.

In 1899, within a year of the publication of his first book, Churchill had completed a further exercise in military history, a study of the River War, the reconquest of the Sudan by General Kitchener after the assassination of Gordon at Khartoum by the Mahdi, a campaign in which Churchill had as on the Indian frontier seen action and achieved distinction in the cavalry charge at Omdurman.

But there is no element of a personal account; no touch of autobiography (there is no trace of the author’s name in the index); no hint of the stark hypnotic experience of war is directly conveyed. These elements of participation are transmuted and distilled into an ordered pattern of a historical study, based on research into the past history of British policy in Egypt, on interrogation of leading actors in the campaign and of the political leaders at home on their conduct of national affairs. Merely personal experience in the present tense was, to the young Churchill, and remained always throughout his life, an aid—as to his mentor Gibbon—to interpretation of the motives of men, and the implications of their actions.

Nearly forty years later he wrote a new preface to *The River War*, in the consciousness of the swiftest acceleration of history in modern times: “A generation has grown up which knows little of why we are in Egypt and the Sudan and what our work there has been. Uninstructed and ignorant impressions colour the decisions not only of Parliaments but of Cabinets. It is my hope that the story which these pages contain may be some help and encouragement to those young men and women who have still confidence in the destiny of Britain in the Orient. They may learn from it how much harder it is to build up and acquire, than to squander and cast away.” The personal saga of the charge at Omdurman blends without arrogance into the national tradition.

I think that Churchill would have appreciated the words of your great historian Burckhardt: «Das Leben des Okzidents ist ein Kampf. Und für seine Person mag auch der Historiker sich demselben seines Ortes nicht entziehen können: als Mensch in seiner Zeitlichkeit muss er etwas Bestimmtes wollen und vertreten, aber in seiner Wissenschaft muss er die höhere Betrachtung vorbehalten.»

When his second book *The River War* appeared in London, Churchill was a prisoner of the Boers in South Africa, having been captured as a war

correspondent. He was no longer an officer in the British army. He had resigned his commission in order to seek a political career for which he now felt ready with the basic elements of his self-education firmly acquired and tested both in experience of war and translation into words. After his escape from internment in South Africa, and return to England, he won his first seat in the House of Commons in 1901 thus entering in the political life of his country—an already familiar landscape to him from the social background and associations of childhood and early manhood, but he was an untried newcomer to its surroundings, pugnacious, assertive and eager.

We are not directly concerned here this evening with Winston Churchill and his progress in all its vicissitudes as a politician and statesman to the summit of power. But one should take note that each stage in his career is marked and enriched by a need to project his own experience, and to enlarge the fields of his knowledge of men and events by continuous literary expression and analysis. Such activity was essential to the man and to the development and fulfilment of his daemonic powers.

It was thus, within a year of his election as a Member of Parliament and amid the turbulence of his initiation into the world of politics, that he undertook to write the biography of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill. This task was completed, in ruthlessly organized intervals of withdrawal from London life, in three and a half years.

Lord Randolph Churchill

Churchill set to work on the biography of his father with military thoroughness. Camps were set up: intelligence gathered: reports compiled. His cousin the Duke of Marlborough put at his disposal a set of rooms in Blenheim Palace, and horses were available for hunting as a recreation. Another cousin, Lord Wimborne, provided him with a study in his house in London next to the Ritz Hotel.

The family papers of Lord Randolph and his political archives were housed at Blenheim and presented to his cousin by the Duke. These provided the raw material, and the first base of operations. As Churchill outlined his task: "For a thing so commonly attempted, political biography is difficult. The style and ideas of the writer must throughout be subordinated to the necessity of embracing in the text those documentary proofs upon which the story depends, letters, memoranda, and extracts from speeches, which inevitably interrupt the sequence of the narrative, must be pieced together upon some consistent and harmonious plan. It is not by the soft touches of a picture, but in hard mosaic or tessellated pavement, that a man's life and fortune must be presented in all its reality and romance."

Here was the sketch plan for the architecture of a classic biography in the grand tradition. The family setting would be drawn lovingly by the son in the historic seat of Blenheim: the chief character would emerge into the public view, speaking and writing in his own words. The account of Lord Randolph's meteoric political career would flash in a brief span of ten years (1880—1890) over the solid firmament of Victorian politics—a lost world to our generation—and crashing in personal disaster.

But the description of the personal and political fate of Lord Randolph is neatly and firmly set against a background of historical narrative—of the contemporary scene of British government. It is compiled in conversations of the author with the main statesmen and politicians of the day, friends and opponents of his father, such as Lord Rosebery and Joseph Chamberlain who provided often with reluctance, but partially yielding to the eager pressing of the son of a brilliant ill-starred colleague. Such precious information, correspondence and reminiscences enabled the author to extend the frame of a personal biography of his father, with the barest touch of filial piety, into a study of the working of British Party affairs and constitutional machinery.

The final result was, in Winston Churchill's own words, "an authentic drama of the House of Commons"—of which he was now a young untried member.

The short period of English political history covered by this biography of Lord Randolph Churchill (1880—1890) is marked in essence by the expanding of the electorate, the entry of new groups and classes into politics, and the competition of the two great aristocratic Parties—Conservative and Liberal—for the votes of the emerging masses, and the consequent and inevitable transformation of the whole structure of the traditional party machine.

In simple terms, the significance of Lord Randolph's career was his spirited attempt to rally these elements, first to the Conservatives and then, on breaking with their leaders, to seek in a doomed but gallant pirate expedition to base a third party on a younger band of politicians, led by himself, and appealing to the new generation of the electorate.

The book appeared in 1905, and received almost universal acclaim from the press as a successful biography in the grand traditional manner.

One reviewer drew attention to a perceptive sentence of the author, describing Lord Randolph's resignation from office, which was his political death warrant. "It is no doubt true that he rates his own power . . . too high, like many a successful man before him—and some since—he thought the forces which he had directed in the past were resident in himself, whereas they were to some extent outside himself and independent."

This study of his father's career was, in a very special sense, a contribution

to the education of his son, clearing his mind and giving substance and belief to his ideas on the recent past of British political history.

In Sir Winston's meditations as his father's biographer, he absorbed the cardinal principle of his public life: the duty of every statesman and politician to bow at all times to the absolute will of the House of Commons.

* * *

In the years following 1905, until the midst of the turmoil of the first World War, Churchill was continually in high public office and had reached the chosen circle of the Cabinet.

It was not only the absorbing pressure of business, and the characteristic concentration on mastering a widening experience of economic, social and defence problems with which as a member of successive British governments he was now directly concerned, that led him to lay aside his pen. The pause was natural. It was a time for action, broad based on a sum of reflected experience, matured and already expressed in his writings.

Moods of total action were to alternate with periods of reflection henceforth throughout his life, and depending on the fortunes of public affairs. For the moment, he had completed a stage of transfusing into literary form his knowledge of men and events—from the frontiers of India to the Nile valley: and on to the clashes with the Boers in South Africa, he had conceived his vision of Empire, interpreted it—tempered by the stark experience of military action. His study of his father's life had defined the outlines of his political creed. He had built his own house, and the shelves were lined. The references were to hand to be checked. Alone he had created his own school and graduated from it; this was the essential rôle of his own writings in the formation of his personality and career. There was to be no fundamental change in his attitudes, in any compartment of his vision of humanity in the years which follow. If I might again quote from Burckhardt: «Mir kommt die ganze Geschichte vor, als wollte man ein Haus bauen, stritte sich aber vorderhand gerichtlich herum, ob das Zimmer hinten hinaus gelbe oder rote Vorhänge erhalten solle.»

The World Crisis (1927)

After 1918 Churchill remained in the Cabinet for another four years as a member of the coalition government of Lloyd George. On the fall of the administration, the vagaries of post-war politics dictated his exclusion from the centres of power, with one interval, until the onset of the Second World War.

These lean years—the locust years, as he was to call them—were a time of frustrated isolation from the mainstream of public affairs and of enforced reflection; a pause from action following the recent high achievements and responsibilities of key offices of state. Under the long shadows cast forward over the survivors by the ghosts of the second conflict, Churchill turned the main weight of his massive powers of concentration to survey the course of this clash of Empires, which had ended in the obliteration of some and the scarred survival of others.

In April 1925, within a year of his retirement from office, the first volume of a new work appeared, nearly twenty years after the publication of his father's life. It was entitled *The World Crisis*. Further volumes followed, the last coming out in 1927 though in effect completed two years earlier. After a period of only twenty-four months of intensive labour, Churchill had completed a wide-ranging interpretation of the events of the First World War. As a main actor—as First Lord of the Admiralty from 1911—1915 at the heart of control of war strategy, and then as Minister of Munitions from 1917—Churchill's approach to this study of war was less firm and simple than in his previous work. He had been too close and too recently to grim quarrels on the strategic conduct of the war, in particular the Dardanelles campaign, to assume with ease the detachment which he always sought in the unfolding of great enterprises. He clearly felt, as an early reaction, the human need for self-justification of his own part in certain great decisions which had been criticized with savagery from various quarters at the time, and round which clouds of future stormy debates would gather. But he was equally aware of the perils of intruding, at the heart of his theme, a jarring note of personal apologia, and in particular in the first volumes he exercised a conscious and hard self-discipline.

As he wrote in the second volume, "I must at the outset disclaim the position of the historian. It is not for me, with my record and special point of view, to pronounce a final conclusion. This must be left to others and at other times. I present it as a contribution to history". But with the violence of the main controversies, essentially tied to his tenure of the Admiralty, already confronted, dissected and unfolded in the narrative, the remaining volumes reflect a sense of relief and mounting serenity.

Churchill had just been reading a classic contemporary account of the English Civil War in the seventeenth century, Daniel Defoe's *Memoirs of a Cavalier*, and as he wrote: "in this delightful work the author hangs the chronicle and discussion of great military events upon the thread of the personal experiences of an individual. I am immensely encouraged to find that I had been unconsciously following with halting steps the example of so great a master of narrative." This passage may well be regarded as the essence

of Churchill's method of historical writing. In later years he would mention what he owed to Defoe and how he read this work at a moment of doubt in the construction of *The World Crisis*—as I can myself recall in evenings of converse in later years.

The World Crisis will remain as a monumental storehouse, still unsurpassed, of the history of the First World War. Built from materials inspected and collected from all quarries available to its architect—his own ministerial papers and such government and Cabinet documents as passed through his hands, personal information from leading colleagues and participants, the early publications of writers, both amongst the Allies and on the enemy side—all assembled and shaped by his own spacious experience.

The book is, above all, a model study in modern warfare, so close in time to the events described; yet, with this short distance so consciously measured, a cool historical perspective prevails.

The grand simplicity of structure, the severe attention to chronology and selection of evidence, the maintenance throughout of the commanding point of vantage from which the whole scene of action can be majestically seen passing in review. "I seek to guide the reader to where the course of events is being decided, whether it be on the battlefield, in a conning-tower, in Council, in Parliament, in a lobby, a laboratory or a workshop."

Churchill also added that "such a method is no substitute for history", which would be written and re-interpreted by future generations. Nor did he ever believe that facile lessons could be drawn from the study of history. He expressed in *The World Crisis* his own conviction in short sharp terms: "The Truths of War are absolute, but the principles governing their application have to be deduced on each occasion from the circumstances, which are always different; and in consequence no rules are any guide to action. Study of the past is invaluable as a means of training and storing the mind, but it is no help without selective discernment of the particular facts and of their emphasis, relation and proportion." Churchill was no believer in the lessons of history as a substitute for political judgment.

The pages of this book also represent the height of his own special art of narrative. As, for example, on the mobilization of the Royal Navy on the eve of the First World War: "We may now picture this great Fleet, with its flotillas and cruisers, steaming slowly out of Portland Harbour, squadron by squadron, scores of gigantic castles of steel wending their way across the misty, shining sea, like giants bowed in anxious thought. We may picture them again as darkness fell, eighteen miles of warships running at high speed and in absolute blackness through the narrow Straits, bearing with them into the broad waters of the North the safeguard of considerable affairs." Such passages as these, and the set battle pieces of the Marne and Jutland, do not only stem from an early study of the craft of writing, but

are in the great classical tradition of British political oratory. The experience of the soldier, the journalist, the young politician are now blended with that of the statesman, the orator and the strategist.

Studded like bright jewels in the progress of the narrative, one finds the polished images of the main characters in the saga: General Joffre: "It would be difficult to find any figure more unlike the British idea of a Frenchman than this bull-headed, broad-shouldered, slow thinking phlegmatic bucolic personage . . . He represented and embodied 'stability' in a world of change, and 'impartiality' in a world of faction. Here at any rate was something for France with the politicians chattering, fuming, and frothing along to Armageddon, to rest her hand upon."

And Sir Henry Wilson: "the British Chief of Staff in whom the War Cabinet found for the first time an expert adviser of superior intellect who could explain lucidly and forcefully the whole situation and give reasons for the adoption or rejection of any course. Such gifts are, whether rightly or wrongly, the object of habitual distrust in England. But they are rightly a very great comfort in the transaction of public business . . . I can see him so clearly as I write, standing before the map in the Cabinet Room, giving one of his terse telegraphese appreciations. This morning, Sir, a new battle. This time it is we who have attacked . . . Haig is in his train, Prime Minister, very uncomfortable, near the good city of Amiens. It is a big battle. We thought that you would not like us to tell you about it beforehand."

The sketches of the politicians are muted; the controversies, deeply involving Churchill himself, too recent for the licence of the pen. But, just as the essence of *The World Crisis* is the history of the conduct of war, so it is also the story of the relationship between soldiers and politicians—a central and continuous theme throughout the book.

The equilibrium of the British party system and the national unity forged in 1914 crumbled early under the pressures created by the fateful ups and downs of the conflict. In this process, a Fourth Estate in the realm, the British newspaper Press had appeared already by the spring of 1915 as a new and, at times, disquieting element in public affairs, and its swaying influence required special analysis—a subject which had touched Churchill personally—often in dramatic and bitter form and which pressed upon his attention in describing the problems of government in Britain in time of war.

Churchill illumines, in these terms, the dilemma encrusted in the British tradition of the conduct of public affairs in time of war: "The Press, though its information flowed in from a thousand rills, possessed only a partial knowledge of the facts and operative causes as these were known to the Government; and these Governments themselves only imperfectly apprehended the stupendous problems which they were attempting to solve. Half our mistakes and many of our misfortunes could have been avoided if the

great issues of war policy and strategy could have been fought out across the floor of the House of Commons in the full light of day. But this was impossible when the Enemy was the auditor of every discussion . . .”

This led to a series of absurd conventions being established in the public mind—in particular “the foolish doctrine was preached to the public through innumerable agencies that the Generals and Admirals must be right on war matters, and civilians of all kinds must be wrong . . . The feeble or presumptuous politician is portrayed, cowering in his office, intent on the crash of the world or party intrigues or personal glorification. To him enters the great commander, resplendent in uniform, glittering with decorations . . . this stately figure offers his clear, far-sighted guidance and counsel . . . But his advice is rejected; his sound plans put aside . . . baffled by political chatterboxes and incompetents”.

Perhaps it was a miracle, when contrasted with the ruthless precision of the German war machine, that the Allies won the First Great War at all. *The World Crisis* is the story of how this was done. In the last paragraph of this work lies a desolate question, “Is this the end? Is it to be merely a chapter in a cruel and senseless story?”.

For the historian there can be no comment.

According to T. E. Lawrence of Arabia, Churchill once told him that *The World Crisis* was a “pot-boiler”. “Some pot” commented Lawrence. “I suppose he realizes that he is the only high person since Thucydides and Clarendon who has put his generation imaginatively in his debt.”

Marlborough—His Life and Times

The last volume of *The World Crisis* had been completed in 1925. In the previous autumn, Churchill had been invited to join the Conservative Government of Stanley Baldwin, as Chancellor of the Exchequer and was to serve in this office for the next four and a half years. With the fall of the administration in May 1929, Churchill found himself again in political opposition as a private member of parliament, increasingly isolated and alienated from public affairs in these appeasing years.

It was during this enforced period of political inactivity, conforming to the pattern of his life with its alternating pauses between action and reflection, that Churchill embarked upon the historical investigation of the career of his ancestor, John, first Duke of Marlborough. He had been early drawn to the subject while a young army officer in India, when he read, with indignation, the character assassination of his ancestor by Lord Macaulay under the guise of the professional impartiality of the historian. He was now to set out on a quest for retrospective justice, rekindling grim and dead controversies more than two centuries past. “We can only hope that truth

will follow swiftly enough to fasten the label 'Liar' to Macaulay's genteel coat-tails", and with gusto and a powerful armoury he launched his assault.

The biography of Marlborough is an excursion into the academic history of an earlier age, beyond the range of living witnesses and personal experience, a survey of war and politics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The available records of this world—political, diplomatic, military and literary—were vast, and only to a certain degree studied by earlier professional historians. It would have been surprising however if Churchill had been daunted by the weight of evidence to be mastered, sifted and analysed. His mind was excited by the very extent of such a task and his unshakable conviction that "recorded truths" and human character at whatever moment in time are definable and absolute.

As in Churchill's own lifetime, England was at war with a continental enemy bent on the domination of Europe. With the security of the British Isles guaranteed by superior naval power, and the strategy of military warfare dictated by the need to maintain and support a Grand Alliance against France, the conduct of this so-called War of the Spanish Succession provided a familiar line of landmarks: the quarrels of allies; the intrigues of politicians and crises on the Home Front; the rivalry of Generals and their basic clashes on strategic plans; the tempting whispers of a compromise peace; the military victory, the fruits of which were to be thrown away in the final hour.

The British Grand Design of war in this earlier century was to a greater degree than perhaps at any moment in our history—until the Second World War—the conception and achievement of one man.

Marlborough, whatever the shortcomings and weaknesses of his personality, which Churchill confronts with lucidity, was without dispute the most successful military commander in Europe until Napoleon—and he was never defeated in the field, but, in the event, by British politicians on the Home Front. Here lay, in Churchill's vision, the essential drama: the contrast between the glory and place in history of Marlborough's deeds and—as he expresses it—"the small regard of his countrymen for his memory".

I might mention in passing that Marlborough had also in his early career been exposed to charges of treason—that he betrayed a British military expedition to the Jacobite Court in exile in France by a letter to the former King James II. Meticulous research proved beyond reasonable doubt that this letter is a forgery—the work of secret service agents and spies of the day. Perhaps Sir Winston's own comment on this episode is not without a certain relevance "an sich". "It is astonishing that so many famous writers have occupied this to traduce not merely Marlborough, but the entire generation of statesmen and warriors who bore England forward as she has never been borne before or since. It is an aberration of historical technique."

Churchill's undisguised and proclaimed intention in this study of Marlborough was to present "a more just and generous judgment" based on a critical survey of the evidence. This book could be described as a study of the hero in history, demolishing the meretricious legend of Macaulay without the invention of new myths.

The historical material, first and foremost in the rich and mainly unpublished Marlborough papers at Blenheim and then in Vienna, Paris, and Hague and Frankfurt, and other continental archives, was assembled for Churchill by young historians of academic formation. There were three of us in succession. I had the immeasurable privilege to be one.

This personal association begins with my taking over the work in progress on the second volume of the life of Marlborough. It was to continue, with the interval of war, for thirty years, and represents my credentials for my presence here among you this evening. I was soon to learn in evenings and early morning hours in his study at Chartwell, his country house in Kent, vastly more of the sense of history than my formal university education as a student, and later as a teacher, ever taught me.

One brief anecdote may, I hope, throw a flicker of candlelight on the desk. As I have just mentioned, Marlborough's career was blighted for ever by a political crisis on the Home Front. In the year 1710 his colleagues and supporters in the government in London were cast from office in a general election, and his enemies, skilled in the peculiar savagery of the political life of the day, came to power, negotiated a separate peace with the enemy at the expense of our allies, and by an outmoded judicial procedure impeached Marlborough before the House of Lords on grounds of financial speculation—a step essential to the calculated destruction of his public reputation without which the ignominious treaty could not have been carried—an accusation which proved on serious investigation to be without foundation.

I had made a special study of the history of the seventeenth century at Oxford and it was with some pride and self-satisfaction that I wrote for Churchill a study of these crucial elections of 1710—full of, to me, fresh and profound judgments based on unpublished material from archives—throwing new light and, as I thought in my youthful inexperience, a somewhat remarkable contribution.

I gave the paper to Churchill late one evening: he read it, as always, with deliberation, made no comment and, as was his habit, paced the length of his study, deep in silence. After a while he summoned a secretary and began to dictate. (He incidentally never *wrote* his books, and his pen was kept for the tireless correction of dictated drafts.) During the next hours, striding up and down the room without a glance at my memorandum, he re-created and realized these events, and by a dual process of historical imagination and

personal understanding of the absolutes of human conduct, he transformed the episode into history. This is a small glimpse into method—to be repeated, in my experience on so many rewarding occasions. Its uniqueness defies precision in analysis. Perhaps it could be said that the conscious and momentary identification of Churchill's personality with past historical events lighted them with flashes of original insight, revealed with acuteness their contours but without distorting their image.

The History of the English-Speaking Peoples

The four volumes of *Marlborough—His Life and Times* were completed between the years 1933 and 1938—between the rise of Hitler and the Munich pact. Churchill's country house of Chartwell was no ivory tower of the scholar, withdrawn from the darkening world of public affairs. Clouded by the mounting threat of war in Europe for the second time in one generation, Chartwell was also the symbolic watch-tower of the elder statesman ever seeking to divine the portents of the rising storm. There was much coming and going in the house during these last years of brittle peace. The visits of former colleagues and parliamentarians, of close friends and advisers on affairs of state, of statesmen and leaders from Europe, from the British Commonwealth, and from the United States.

During the night and early morning hours the story of John, first Duke of Marlborough, and the forging of the Grand Alliance against another continental tyranny, was subjected to that concentrated and minute intensity and an inspired mastery.

In day time, these same searching powers were switched to reducing, step by step, to an ordered and significant pattern a viable interpretation of contemporary affairs. To Churchill the past and present were one and indivisible, and successful action in the future depended inexorably upon an unerring interpretation and discovery of the essential truth hidden in both.

It would be deeply and disastrously misleading to draw more than fleeting light attention to rough historical parallels in any discussion of why Churchill, at any given moment in his life, turned to one subject or another for investigation. I think, however, that there is a certain and simple logical connection between his aroused interest in the mobilization of Europe, under Marlborough's leadership, against the French of Louis XIV; and the sense of mortal peril confronting Europe, Britain and the Empire as the real nature emerged of Hitler's apocalyptic maniac gamble for world power; and also Churchill's intuitive sense that the conflict, ahead and close at hand, could only be triumphantly resolved by another Grand Alliance—this time with

the United States, and by the mobilization of the whole community of the English-Speaking Peoples.

To write such a history of this community: the British Isles, the Empire, and the United States; to grasp the essential ties of language, law and institutions which bound it together, had long been in Churchill's mind. He also believed that in a very real historical sense there was an Anglo-American heritage within this family of nations, whose history would be a worthy and fruitful subject of enquiry. In the closing months of 1938, therefore, Churchill accepted to undertake this task and christened it *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.

In less than a year war had engulfed Europe. Churchill had already produced a first draft of half a million words before he returned to the First Lord's room in the Admiralty, where he had issued the battle orders to the British navy in 1914.

The final version of the *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* was completed after the Second World War, the last of the four volumes appearing in 1958. This was to be his final publication: the epilogue of his writings. He was then eighty-four years old.

In defiance of strict chronology I feel that the place of this book lies here at this penultimate stage of our review this evening. It could be described as a chronicle, personal—and at times arbitrary—in its selection of landmarks of the main course of the tale.

It is history as a Renaissance pageant, woven in a tapestry of images, of kings and wars, of high adventure and exploration across the seas, from a mediaeval island realm to the expansion of a community astride the world. Although calling throughout upon the advice and learning of academic persons, Churchill picked from them what he chose. He was not seeking the sum of the latest scholarship, but to draw on it to ensure the accuracy of his narrative of why and how it all happened.

As he wrote in his final preface: "This book does not seek to rival the works of professional historians. It aims rather to present a personal view on the processes whereby English-speaking peoples throughout the world have achieved their distinctive position and character. I write about the things in our past that appear significant to me, and I do so as one not without some experience of historical and violent events in our own time."

Only reluctantly would Churchill be driven to discard an ancient legend, embedded in his memory and which had fired his youthful imagination.

I remember on one occasion just before the War an argument conducted with energetic brutality and disarming kindness as to whether or not King Alfred ever burnt the cakes. Churchill explained that, at times of crisis, myths had their historical importance: that the cakes symbolized a myth of British resistance in their sternest hour against the foreign invader,

and were the source of inspiration to those dim distant figures, the Counts of the Saxon shore, striving to defend the island. I was duly chastened, and shortly afterwards, with inexorable historical logic, Churchill was to find himself the lineal and supreme successor of those Counts of the Saxon shore, and the leader of the most decisive British resistance in her history—at Dunkirk.

Myths have their poetic place in history in epic times. It was for a brief spell his habit as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1940, while conducting the grave affairs of the Royal Navy during the North Sea battles of the Norwegian campaign, to spend an hour or so in the afternoon or in the early morning hours completing his chapters on the Norman Conquest and mediaeval England. Naval signals awaited attention, admirals tapped impatiently on the door of the First Lord's room, while on one occasion talk inside ranged round the spreading shadows of the Norman invasion and the figure of Edward the Confessor who, as Churchill wrote, "comes down to us faint, misty, frail". I can still see the map on the wall, with the dispositions of the British Fleet off Norway, and hear the voice of the First Lord as he grasped with his usual insight the strategic position in 1066. But this was no lack of attention to current business. It was the measure of the man with the supreme historical eye. The distant episodes were as close and real as the mighty events on hand.

When Churchill returned to complete the narrative twenty years had passed, scarred by a world conflict "on the largest scale known to man".

The Second World War

We are approaching the last milestone in our progress this evening, marked by the six volumes of Sir Winston's record—directed to future generations—of the course of the Second World War. This work is, at the same time, the literary expression of his Finest Hour. "I must regard these volumes as a continuation of the story of the First World War which I set out in 'The World Crisis'. Together, if the present work is completed, they will cover an account of another Thirty Years War. I am perhaps the only man who has passed through both the two supreme cataclysms of recorded history in high executive office. Whereas however in the First World War I filled responsible but subordinate posts, I was in this second struggle with Germany for more than five years the Head of His Majesty's Government. I write therefore from a different standpoint and with more authority than was possible in my earlier books . . . I doubt whether any similar record exists or has ever existed of the day-to-day conduct of war and administration."

In the vaults of the present Ministry of Defence in Whitehall are preserved the files of the private office of the Prime Minister covering the years 1940—

1945. They form a unique set of British archives, never preserved in this separate fashion before. In these documents one can trace at a precise moment such papers as passed across the Prime Minister's desk and therefore upon what written evidence action was taken and policy conceived.

I spent many hours in this room, striving to reconstruct and recapture the process of decision-making, as documented in this collection of Sir Winston's private office and which had been housed in wartime in Downing Street. The papers in these filing cabinets, frozen at a moment in recorded time (as is the display on the walls of the central map room next door, on which are marked the dispositions of the armies, the fleets and the air forces of nations at war at the hour of the armistice, and they remain untouched) bear silent witness to the conflict and to the moment of final victory: the prepared memoranda, minutes and telegrams—the pencilled notes from secretaries—actually presented to the Prime Minister. In specially bound volumes, the complete record of his own minutes and telegrams are preserved.

But the absence of vital recorded information at critical moments provokes tantalising reflection. Firstly, the telephone is the plague of modern historians. If only, for instance, a file existed of the transatlantic conversations of Churchill and Roosevelt (some were indeed monitored and deciphered by the Germans). Secondly, how many private and critical conversations were held without the presence of secretaries with their notebooks: the Prime Minister and his advisers in conclave in his bedroom, in the cabin of aircraft, or on the deck of ships.

These are the losses of history. To take two striking examples. If one attempts to reconstruct the last-minute Anglo-French discussions in Bordeaux in June 1940 from a search in the Prime Minister's personal files only barely legible pencilled notes remain, taken down on the telephone by British Foreign Office officials. Of the fall of Mussolini in July 1943 there is no trace at all. Churchill was at sea on the way to Quebec at the time, and whatever message was handed to him on board has not survived.

But these gaps are marginalia in comparison with the massive documentation of *The Second World War*, embracing not only all Sir Winston's personal records but drawn from the archives of the Cabinet and the main departments of state. But these volumes are not intended to be a definite history of the conflict, but an account written by the Head of the Government, as he himself had made clear, seen through his eyes almost daily, of the decisions taken under his leadership; of the evidence, in writing and in discussion, on how he acted as he did—an exposure to future critics, and they are not lacking, of his stewardship as Prime Minister of England during the greatest crisis of modern times.

Perhaps a special fascination of this book lies in the manner of presenting

the main strategic and political controversies arising from the British conduct of the conflict—in deliberate anticipation of future clashes of interpretation, of retrospective explosions of personal rancour, and expressions of olympian wisdom after the event. The “recorded truths” in his phrase, are presented by Sir Winston in his account of the Second World War as an advocate for the defence. The final judgment must lie with others. The case for the defence has been made. It is for the court of history to pronounce its verdict.

Before closing this evening I would like, if I may, to touch on one episode, chosen arbitrarily as I was concerned directly in its historical reconstruction, which has provoked both bitter controversy and initiated myths of current import. It also casts a brief flash of light on corners of Sir Winston’s manifold personality as a statesman, a man, and a responsible historian. I refer to the sinking of the French fleet at Oran in June 1940. Was this tragic and ruthless act necessary? Our great ally, France, bound to us by deep and lasting ties in two world wars, had been hurled from the conflict and the lightning German occupation of the territory brought the Nazi armies to the Channel and Atlantic ports. Britain was faced in her turn with the menace of enemy invasion. Her only lifeline lay through the Mediterranean to the East, preserved by the British Navy in that inland sea. The seizure by the Germans of the French fleet stationed in Toulon and North Africa would change the balance at one blow and force Britain to surrender and defeat. The issue was as simple as that. Would the French Government of Admiral Darlan accept British conditions to place her Navy out of German reach in African or West Indian ports? The records of the French Ministry of Marine are impeccably preserved: British requests were rejected, but guarantees were given that all resistance would be offered to any German move to use force in taking possession of the ships. Critical and hourly talks were engaged between the British and French naval commanders in the Mediterranean. Churchill took up his quarters in the Admiralty in London and, when all hope of negotiation failed, he signed the fatal signals to destroy the French battle fleet on his personal authority. Such a decision, he said, must not lie on the consciences of the British admirals and naval commanders. The burden before history would be his alone.

When we came to assemble the evidence, the vital oral testimony on the British naval side was lacking. The witnesses were dead. One of them, the former British Naval Attaché in Paris Captain Holland, who acted as emissary between the two fleets at their stations, had died literally of a broken heart. The British naval records show the stages by which Churchill reached his final decision; the French archives reveal the professed intention of Darlan to sabotage the French ships in event of a German move (as happened in 1942 at Toulon). The risk was to accept Darlan’s word. The stake was the maintenance of Britain at war.

The issue was one of confidence, not of documents. Could the British trust Darlan? Churchill decided not—and ordered the sinking of the main French battle fleet. The debate on this tragedy, and whether Churchill was justified in acting as he did, continues to bedevil historians on both sides.

The conception of Churchill's *Second World War* was challenged in some quarters at the time of its publications, because his account is primarily based on his minutes and telegrams, and because the replies of those to whom these papers are addressed (cabinet colleagues, foreign statesmen, military commanders and others—with some notable exceptions, such as his correspondence with Roosevelt and Stalin) are not printed. Such a criticism is to misunderstand Sir Winston's central intention: the contribution to history, massively documented, of his own record as Head of His Majesty's Government during the years of the Second World War.

The other participants and future historians should have their say, and many have already been spurred to do so.

Conclusion

It was with some trepidation that I chose as my subject this evening "Churchill as an Historian". His works are the sum of the whole range of his experience; the writer is the embodiment of the man. Each book is intensely lived. The historian and man of letters represent but one facet of such a character.

Between the publication of the *Malakand Field Force* in 1898 and the appearance of the last volume of *The English-Speaking Peoples* in 1958 lies a span of sixty years. I have attempted, in your presence here, to convey some impression of the stately procession of the major contributions to history of Sir Winston Churchill who, on his long journey (as he wrote with beguiling understatement about Marlborough) "had marched by unexpected paths": from the Indian frontier of the Empire as a cavalry lieutenant, to Downing Street—to be twice Prime Minister of England.

His writings stand as the British epic of the last half century, in a broad and orderly vision of a world which has passed from us beyond recall. In his speech in Zurich in 1946 he asks the sombre rhetorical question: "Is it the only lesson of history that mankind is unteachable?" He made no answer, but throughout his writings the implication is clear: the future has no meaning unless related to the past. The study of "what happened and why" must remain a ceaseless quest. As we are told by Aristotle: "History is what Alcibiades did and suffered." Churchill would also have added that no man in history, whatever his human stature and achievement, should be shrouded by the gratitude or admiration of his generation—of his friends and

supporters of the time—from the total scrutiny of succeeding generations, of learned scholars or petty scribblers alike.

In an essay by him on Clemenceau you may find the following passage: “Many futile lamentations have been printed about the quarrel between Clemenceau and Foch. The reading world has been invited to deplore the mutual reproaches of these twin saviours of France in her extremity. Both disputants were old men, covered with glory and nearing the grave. They belong to history; and a deathless page of history belongs to them. Why should they tear that page? Even if Clemenceau did treat Foch roughly, and did brush him from the political arena as soon as the victory was won, or if Foch had sent earlier a plaster bust of himself to Clemenceau, hoping to procure patronage, surely, it is urged, these tales might well have been left untold. Everything should be presented decorously to future generations. Litter should not be allowed to gather around the monument upon which only the good and great things that men have done should be inscribed.

The Muse of History must not be fastidious. She must see everything, touch everything, and, if possible, smell everything. She need not be afraid that these intimate details will rob her of Romance and Hero-worship. Recorded trifles and tittle-tattle may—and, indeed ought—to wipe out small people. They can have no permanent effect upon those who have held with honour the foremost stations in the greatest storms. A generation or two—a century, certainly—will present these two men in their true proportions. The judgment of our descendants will be unruffled by their final disputations.”