



Churchill: The man not the myth, Part II

by *Alastair Stewart*

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THE SECOND WORLD WAR dominates so much of Winston Churchill's persona that most consider it a straightforward story of the right man, at the right time, doing the right thing. The reality is decidedly more complex for those who refuse to see Churchill as a man of extraordinary gifts rivalled by intransigent Persian flaws.

Sir Max Hastings concludes, in his remarkable book *Finest Years: Churchill as Warlord*, that while Churchill was an imperfect occupant of *10 Downing Street*, he was the only man capable of leading Britain at a time of war. What he adds, and what is crucial to developing a rounded view of Churchill, is that he was great because of, and not in spite of, his past mistakes which made him keenly aware of the human cost of war.

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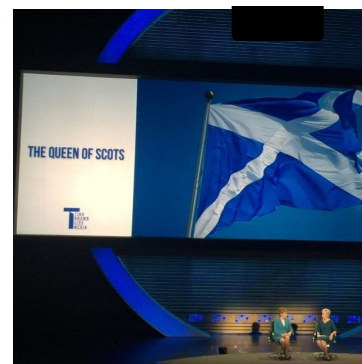


In his book, *A History of Modern Britain*, Andrew Marr likewise suggests that modern world history began in the summer of 1940 when the newly appointed prime minister decided to fight on against the Nazis. The five years of the Second World War changed the world, but the first months of Churchill's leadership changed history. As Hastings points out too, contrary to the mythologising about the summer of 1940 as a ubiquitous coming together in the country, Churchill's determination to fight rather than enter into talks with Nazi Germany was at odds with the British monarchy, senior politicians and a significant swathe of British public opinion.

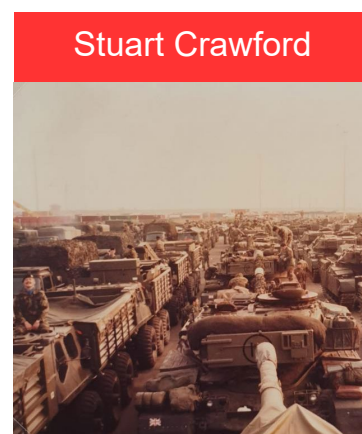
They were not at fault for this view. Churchill's reputation by 1940 was notorious; a conceited glory-hunting maverick of backbench ranking who had spent the previous 40 years getting further demoted in ministerial rank. He had even changed political party, twice, from Conservative to Liberal in 1904 and back again in 1924.

There is no understating the controversy that courted Churchill's earlier ministerial career. Churchill's decision as Home Secretary to send in soldiers against protesters during the 1910 Tonypany Riots, and again in Glasgow in 1919; his on the ground meddling with police operations during the Sidney Street siege in 1911; his disastrous involvement in the Dardanelles campaign as First Lord of the Admiralty; his sanctioning the use of tear gas on Kurdish tribesmen in Iraq in 1919 as Secretary of State for War, his creation of the Black and Tans in the Irish War of Independence; his disastrous decision to return Britain to the gold standard as Chancellor in 1925 and his opposition to Indian independence throughout the 1930s placed him at odds with the British establishment and gave him a dubious public image as a maverick.

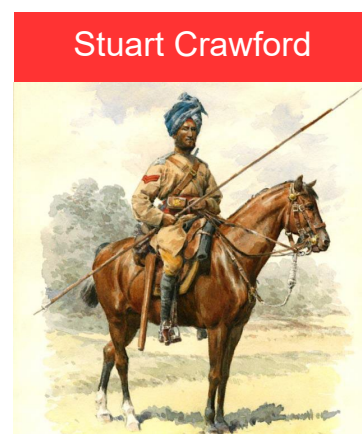
Without question, the best source to understanding the formation of Churchill's alleged arrogance comes from his youth. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill, once said of



*Image without substance:
Nicola Sturgeon and the
SNP*



*Musings of a REAL Tank
Commander – Part 14
Overrun by Yanks but
saved by very cheap Gin*



*Musings of a REAL tank
commander – Part 13*

William Gladstone that he was an “An old man in a hurry.” The same was true of his young son, whose writings before being elected to Parliament in 1900 coalesce to form a brilliant display of youthful name hunting.

In 1895 Churchill was commissioned into the 4th Queen’s Own Hussars. To earn additional pay to support himself, he gained his colonel’s agreement to observe the Cuban War of Independence to send war reports to *The Daily Graphic*. He was subsequently posted back to his regiment, then based in British India, where he took part in and reported on the Siege of Malakand for *The Pioneer* and *The Daily Telegraph*.

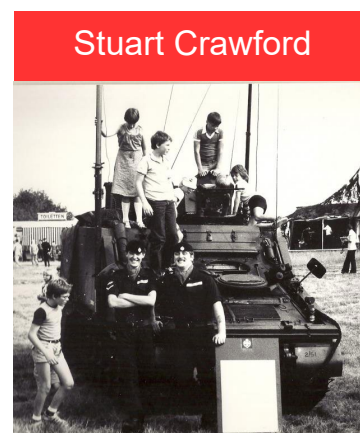
Between 1898 to 1908, beginning with his first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* to *My African Journey* in 1908, Churchill fashions himself as a man of action, a man of decisiveness. He even wrote his only novel, *Savrola*, published in 1898. The same year he was transferred to the Sudan, took part in the Mahdist War and participated in the Battle of Omdurman in September. He published his recollections in *The River War* in 1899, the same year he resigned his commission and travelled to South Africa as the correspondent with *The Morning Post* to report on the Second Boer War.

The journalist and historian Paul Johnson estimates that Churchill wrote an estimated eight to ten million words in more than forty books and thousands of newspaper and magazine articles. Of the best sources to consider Churchill’s reporting, *Churchill Comes of Age: Cuba 1895* by Hal Klepak, *Winston Churchill Reporting: Adventures of a Young War Correspondent* by Simon Read and *The Literary Churchill: Author, Reader, Actor* by Jonathan Rose have provided rare an invigorating insight into Churchill’s formative years.

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The two Brians: Scotland Matters interviews Brian Wilson & Brian Monteith



His writing, both daring in pen and by pistol, were colourful displays of someone trying to make a career push, but by means that became overtly obvious by the 1930s. By the time he published *My Early Life* in 1930, Churchill was well out of power with little prospect of returning to it. There's almost a forlornness to the fact that in his 50s he wrote memoirs of a more exciting youth, but a delightful irony that he never followed it up with a sequel because, as Harold Macmillan famously quipped, "events, my dear boy, events."

Arrogance of youth

Arrogant temerity and a sincere belief in himself is a trait that has always haunted Churchill's public image. Nevertheless, the point of considering Churchill's foibles is not to diminish him. To appreciate Churchill's weaknesses is understand how his successes are all the more special because they were informed by deep character flaws that had produced a less than idyllic political track record. As John Lukacs eloquently charts in his book

, it was Churchill's outsider status which served him best when he had to connive and cajole support for war with Hitler in the face of overwhelming political and public opposition.

Churchill's most significant achievement by the age of 65 years was to maintain the bombast of his youth but learn the lessons of arrogance that had caused so much folly in his early career. In *The Second World War*, Churchill's official six-volume history of the war, he said:

"Thus, then, on the night of the 10th of May, at the outset of this mighty battle, I acquired the chief power in the State. ... During these last crowded days of the political crisis, my pulse had not quickened at any moment. I took it all as it came. But I cannot conceal from the reader of this truthful account that as I went to bed at about 3 a.m. I was conscious of a profound sense of relief. At last I had the authority to give directions over the whole scene. I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had

been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.

“Ten years in the political wilderness had freed me from ordinary party antagonisms. My warnings over the last six years had been so numerous, so detailed, and were now so terribly vindicated, that no one could gainsay me. I could not be reproached either for making the war or with want of preparation for it. I thought I knew a good deal about it all, and I was sure I should not fail. Therefore, although impatient for the morning, I slept soundly and had no need for cheering dreams. Facts are better than dreams.”

Yet, he was also far from confident on May 10, as General Hastings Ismay (chief military assistant and the principal link between Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff) recorded in his *memoirs*:

“Poor people, poor people. They trust me, and I can give them nothing but disaster for quite a long time.”

Churchill was not without error, but he deserves more credit for muzzling the youthful hubris that had marred his reputation in controversy right up to 1939 when he became First Lord of the Admiralty again. This was the man who, after all, had eerily predicted what place might await him in Britain's future:

The guilty warrior?

Whether from a desire to clear his name or through shame, Churchill's decision to fight on the front line of the trenches at least suggests that the horrendous loss of life at Gallipoli had a profound impact on his life; one that resulted in him risking it and coming under fire on more than one occasion. The point is not to contrive an intention to commit suicide, but to establish a concern for the men who served under him, that pushed aside any natural conceit. As Sir Martin Gilbert notes in his third official volume of Churchill's life, *Winston S. Churchill: The Challenge of War, 1914–1916*: “While serving on the western front during the early months of 1916 Churchill was tormented by news of the evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula, and brooded upon the series of naval and military failures which had made the evacuation inevitable.”

In late January of that year, he led his troops into battle near the Belgian town of Ploegsteert. His own bravery in the fighting won the respect of his men as Captain Andrew Dewar Gibb, an officer who worked closely with Churchill, recorded in his fascinating book *With Winston Churchill at the Front*.

When his Battalion was to be amalgamated, Churchill decided to return to politics, but not before doing his utmost to ensure his men were looked after. “He took endless trouble,” Captain Gibb recorded:

“He borrowed motor-cars and scoured France, interviewing Generals and Staff-officers great and small, in the effort to do something to help those who had served under him.

“I believe every man in the room felt Winston Churchill's leaving us a real personal loss”.

When he returned to Parliament, during the summer of 1916, Churchill believed, as Gilbert notes “that his knowledge of war policy and his experience of trench warfare could enable him to contribute to shortening the

war and reducing the scale of the slaughter which he abhorred.”

In May, “returned to the House of Commons, where,” Gilbert concludes, “he found himself a lonely opposition figure in a hostile parliament.”

The ‘Black Dog’ companion?

Churchill’s doctor, Charles Wilson (later Lord Moran) famously published his ‘diaries’,

which chronicled his time in Churchill’s service from 1940. Moran, contrary to the impression created in his book, kept no actual diary during his years as Churchill’s doctor and in fact compiled them from notes years later.

Nevertheless, they afford a clinical insight into Churchill’s mental health. The book revealed that the “Black Dog” was the name Churchill gave to “the prolonged fits of depression from which he suffered.”

If there is not a direct causal link that the Dardanelles caused an episode, there are grounds to infer that it lead to an expectation of death in 1915. Churchill wrote a letter to his wife as early as July of that year, before he resigned from the government, in preparation for joining the Western Front:

Twenty years later and the cost of Gallipoli was evidently on Churchill’s mind and, perhaps with irony, was probably more responsible for saving hundreds of thousands of lives in the Second World War and tempering Churchill’s own, younger, assuredness than anything else.

Both Churchill and Field Marshal Alan Brooke, his Chief of the Imperial General Staff, fiercely resisted American calls to invade France in 1942. Mindful of the heavy infantry casualties incurred during the First World War (in which

both had served and seen the mass slaughter and fearing another Somme or Dardanelles), both men argued that the Allies did not have the resources or manpower to stage an amphibious and air attack on France at that time.

They favoured a less direct attack on the more powerful German war machine and patience before an immediate invasion. The result of their protests was Operation Torch and the invasion of French North Africa, a springboard from which to launch later into Italy, what Churchill called the “soft underbelly of Europe.”

Churchill’s sense of responsibility for human life and his reluctance to waste it, and to defend it, is an oft-overlooked characteristic of his leadership. Churchill told Dwight D. Eisenhower, then the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, that he planned to accompany HMS Belfast to watch the 156,000 Allied troops as part of the Normandy landings in 1944. Eisenhower, who relayed the story in his memoirs *Crusade in Europe* and an *interview* with Walter Cronkite, objected and Churchill rebuffed him: “You have the operational command of all forces, but you are not responsible administratively for the makeup of the crews.” Churchill said he would just sign on as a member of His Majesty’s ship and there was nothing Eisenhower could do about it. It took an *intervention* from King George VI before he backed down, who said to Churchill that if he went, it was his duty to go as well.

The military man

Considering Churchill’s life as a series of victorious vignettes removes the crucial detail that his leadership was informed more by the errors in his life. For all the novelty of an elder statesman taking the reigns of Britain’s war machine, there were decades of experience behind him. When his country needed him most, his great feat was to put aside a lifetime of conceit and to draw on every sinew, thread and memory to ensure decision-making was a combination of industrious imagination and an appreciation that human lives were being deployed in his name.

This was the difference between Adolf Hitler and Churchill, and ultimately why the former had to impose his will, and the latter could, above all else, inspire people to follow him. Historians and pundits, revisionist or otherwise, may give their verdicts, but it is the public consciousness that evokes and perpetuates an idea or vision of a famous person.

Reductive zeitgeist is the final resting place for all historical souls of note, and but it is seldom ever correct. Churchill, however, should suffer no such fate regarding his personality, and certainly not regarding his military record.

The *War Diaries* of that Field Marshall Alan Brooke, Churchill's Chief of the Imperial General Staff, kept between 1939 and 1945, is the seminal, intimate account of day-to-day operational life with Churchill.

The diaries were initially intended for his wife, Benita, bearing the request that "on no account must the contents of this book be published." Brooke later edited and added to them in the 1950s, and the first abridged volume was published in 1957; in reaction to his feelings that Churchill gave less credit than was owed to him and other generals in his [series](#).

The diaries were heavily censored at the time of their publication, both to avoid offending the Allies and because of the Official Secrets Act. When they were published in one complete volume in 2002, it was to grand celebration because of their openness that delighted both fans and critics of Churchill. Both camps seized upon the most saccharine elements and both quoted passages in isolation to further their argument that Churchill was arrogant.

Arguably the most famous passage is:

Despite the unequivocal tone, which is not by no means isolated in the course of the diaries, Brooke is not sparing in his praise for the prime minister:

If there appear to be differing interpretations as to whether Brooke thought Churchill a masterful strategist or an amateur maverick ignorantly playing with soldiers, it must be remembered what the motivation behind keeping a diary was. Few did so for posterity; most did so as a real-time mental release over the course of a five-year war.

Regarding proving or disproving whether Churchill was a bully and wildcard, all accounts will offer something to whatever side wants to make a case. Morale ebbed and flowed, battles were won and lost, and all the generals, secretaries, valets and ministers who worked for Churchill felt the good days, the bad, the stresses and sweetness of victory in different ways.

Brooke, for all his criticism of Churchill, admitted that he possessed a:

Brooke's diaries, and all other wartime military and political memoirs and diaries, must be taken as multi-faceted accounts and not as snapshots for a quick conclusion. Instead, they're personal reflections of events that unfolded over five years of inconsistent victory and failure. They were human; their accounts reflect this and the reader should not expect consistency. This, above all else, is where truth is found and why it is a joy to consult original sources wherever possible.

You can read ore writing by Alastair Stewart at his website

[here](#). Photo of Churchill with Tommy gun as he inspects invasion defences near Hartlepool on 31 July 1940 courtesy of Imperial War Museum No.H2646

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