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The Royal Navy

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Detail from Beach at Walmer
Winston Churchill, c. 1938
Oil on canvas, 25x30 in.
Private collection, Coombs 316
Image courtesy of National Churchill Museum and copyright Churchill Heritage Ltd.
See related story on page 44.
FROM THE EDITOR

Churchill and the Royal Navy

A professional army officer by training, Winston Churchill became forever linked with the Royal Navy as a result of his service as First Lord of the Admiralty in the early months of both world wars. This service Churchill himself immortalized in his many Second World War messages to President Roosevelt, where the Prime Minister referred to himself as a “Former Naval Person.”

When the guns of August sounded in 1914, Churchill had already been on the job at the Admiralty for three years. During the pre-war years, he had to contend with what was known as the “New Navalism,” which W. Mark Hamilton shows was a commitment to the principles of Alfred Thayer Mahan: developing and maintaining powerful modern navies. But Churchill also found time to improve the pay and working conditions of the common sailor, as Matthew S. Seligmann shows.

When the First World War began, Churchill was all for action. Not content to sit behind a desk in London, he went to Belgium in the opening weeks of the war and wound up organizing Antwerp’s defenses. Barry Gough explains the heavy criticism that followed. Undaunted, Churchill cast around for offensive operations off Germany’s northwest coast. Stephen McLoughlin demonstrates how this effort ultimately led to a campaign much further afield at the Dardanelles. With respect to that climacteric, Christopher M. Bell has carefully studied the historical record and finds that Churchill did run so far ahead of his professional advisers as his critics found it politically expedient to claim.

Churchill famously returned to the Admiralty at the start of the Second World War in September 1939. Eric Grove reconsiders this second stint as First Lord and finds a mixed record of success and failure crowned with ironic results, because above all it showed that there was still one man of action in Whitehall.

As Prime Minister, Churchill continued to deal with the leaders of the Royal Navy. Bradley P. Tolppanen surveys the field from the stolid Sir Dudley Pound to the charismatic Lord Louis Mountbatten. The most exciting naval action of this time may well have been the sinking of the Bismarck, which Fred Glueckstein looks at in technical detail.

Finally, in more relaxed times, Churchill often took up nautical themes in his art. Timothy Riley paints the picture for us. And Michael McMenamin shows that the editors of the Morning Post did not mean it as a compliment one hundred years ago when they sneered that Churchill was an “unsinkable politician,” but they were far more prescient than they could ever have imagined.

David Freeman, July 2017
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No Rush!
TORONTO—While the hugely successful play *The Audience* and equally successful TV Series *The Crown* deserve praise, both conclude that Winston Churchill delayed the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II to take pressure from the forces which were endeavouring to force him to resign—on the basis that a change of Prime Minister during the period from accession to coronation would not be acceptable.

In the productions, Queen Elizabeth points out to Churchill that the coronation of her father King George VI took place just six months after he acceded to the throne. What should have been pointed out, however, was that arrangements for the coronation had commenced some nine months before, for the intended crowning of King Edward VIII.

To illustrate that the timing from accession to coronation of Queen Elizabeth was in line with previous monarchs:

Edward VII: accession 22 January 1901 & coronation 9 August 1902—18 months and 18 days;

George V: accession 6 May 1910 & coronation 22 June 1911—13 months and 16 days;

Edward VIII/George VI: Accession (Edward) 20 January 1936 & coronation (George) 12 May 1937—15 months and 24 days;

Elizabeth II: accession 6 February 1952 & Coronation 2 June 1953—15 months and 25 days.

Also pertinent is the fact that Churchill still stayed on as Prime Minister until 6 April 1955, a further twenty-two months after the coronation. Churchill did not delay anything; he “went” when he was ready! —Terry Reardon

Coming in *Finest Hour* 178: Churchill and Chartwell
Offering guests a view of the Baltic region in World War II, this program begins with a two-night pre-cruise tour in Copenhagen, one of the first capital cities to fall to Nazi Germany in 1940, and finishes in Stockholm, where politicians delicately maintained neutrality in the conflict. While in Copenhagen, we will focus on the miraculous rescue of 7,000 Danish Jews via small fishing boats to Sweden. Local guides will tell their own families’ rescue stories in the quaint fishing town of Dragør on the outskirts of Copenhagen.

Once aboard Le Soléal, our next three ports will offer insight into the rivalry between Hitler and Stalin. In Helsinki, the Winter War becomes the main topic, while in St. Petersburg we will focus on the scene of one of the longest and most destructive sieges in history, chronicled in Harrison Salisbury’s *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad*. The three million inhabitants endured a merciless siege with temperatures dropping, at times, to 30 degrees below zero. In Tallinn, hear the stories of the locals who sought liberation from Stalin’s tyranny only to suffer through occupation and pillaging by Hitler’s forces.
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"Winston Churchill and the Royal Navy"

The Royal Navy is most proud of its long association with the life and legacy of Sir Winston Churchill. During his period of service as First Lord of the Admiralty from 1911 to 1915 Mr Churchill worked to increase the pay and improve the living conditions of our sailors, modernize our ships, and bring the Senior Service to a state of readiness so that when the First World War began in 1914 it was widely acknowledged that the fleet was ready.

Upon the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the Admiralty once again benefited from Mr Churchill’s leadership during the war’s first months. After he became Prime Minister in 1940 it was His Majesty’s Ships that often carried him to and from his important meetings with President Roosevelt. When writing his memoirs of both World Wars Mr Churchill gave special care and attention to his accounts of naval action. He loved the sea as well as the history and traditions of our service.

 Appropriately, the Royal Navy’s fourth nuclear powered submarine was named HMS Churchill and launched by Sir Winston’s daughter Mary Soames in 1968. The vessel served for over twenty years before decommissioning in 1991. Today we carry on another tradition of association: the navigation officer serving aboard the USS Winston S. Churchill (DDG-81) is always an officer of the Royal Navy.

We would like to congratulate the International Churchill Society for making “Churchill and the Royal Navy” the theme of this issue of Finest Hour. The editors have brought together leading naval historians from around the world to share the latest research into Mr Churchill’s involvement with our service, and we know that you will find the results fascinating.

We wish you all fair winds and following seas.

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At the start of his parliamentary career in 1901, Winston Churchill promoted the old Victorian themes of “peace, retrenchment, and reform,” but at the conclusion of his first decade as an MP, he was a champion of what was known as “New Navalism” and a vocal advocate of a greatly enlarged Royal Navy. At mid-decade, he had changed his party political affiliation from Conservative to Liberal.
The Royal Navy for centuries had been a central fabric in British life, with a glorious and long history. In the first decade of the twentieth century, however, the Senior Service found itself threatened by rival naval powers, which it had never experienced in a global supremacy lasting a hundred years. In 1914, the British Navy was almost as sacred as the Crown—and just as popular. Public interest in the strength of the Royal Navy heightened as the total amount of naval expenditures surpassed all previous records.

The period of “New Navalism” stretched from 1889 until 1914, during which time there was but one three-year period (1905–1908) when naval expenditures were not increasing. The “New Navalism” was a natural product of the combination of economic nationalism and national imperialism, as promoted by the American “Father of the New Navalism,” Alfred Thayer Mahan.

Little Navalist

With his departure from the Conservative Party to the Liberal Party in 1904, Churchill pushed back against this tide of the “New Navalism.” In addressing the Cobden Centenary meeting in June 1904, Churchill said that he protested the “machinery of national slaughter and hoped…the Liberals could promote a reduction of armaments.”

As late as 1908, with his close political ally David Lloyd George, Churchill called the Navy “a toy for the rich,” and the War Office he termed the “Ministry of Slaughter.”

The Navalists would, with Churchill’s arrival as First Lord of the Admiralty in October 1911, speak of his previously held reformist “Little Navy” views, and they would remain chronically suspicious of Churchill’s political agenda. In even stronger reformist language, Churchill had said, “I see little glory in an Empire which can rule the waves and is unable to flush its sewers.”

At the time of the 1907 Second Hague Peace Conference, Churchill had noted, “Europe is now groaning beneath the weight of armies. There is scarcely a single important government whose finances are not embarrassed; there is not a parliament or a people from whom the cry of weariness has not been wrung.”

After 1889 there had been a growing sense of British national insecurity, and by 1914 the nation was a great imperial power on the defensive. After 1900, the “New Navalism” took on both importance and urgency, as the British were increasingly insecure in a highly competitive world.

The Naval Lobby

Who were these Navalists with whom Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty had to contend? The British Navy League, established in 1895, was one of the most visible and vocal forces in the organization and dissemination of Navalism. The League was founded to secure popular support for a strengthened British Navy and to make large sections of the public aware of the obligations and duties of British sea power. Press baron Alfred Harmsworth was a charter member of the Navy League, as were Fleet Street journalists, including The Times’ James Richard Thursfield.

The Navy League was a solid middle-class patriotic organization, and one that the great aristocratic families and the Royal Family served as patrons but rarely as active participants. Churchill himself was a member but seemed, as did the other elites, to have avoided active participation and in fact on occasion resented the League’s strong naval agitation and what he saw as interference with “official” naval policy. The League historically had worked to bolster the influence of the professional sea-lords at the expense of the civilian First Lord of the Admiralty. In 1911, Churchill did serve as honorary vice-president for the Port of Manchester branch of the League, and in 1922, he could be found speaking at Navy League-sponsored public meetings decrying the decline of British sea power. He had avoided another fiercely patriotic group—the
Imperial Maritime League, which had been critical of Churchill’s early years as First Lord, but then reversed its views as war approached.⁸

Even though Churchill’s Liberal Party was less “Navalist” than the Conservatives, the party of H. H. Asquith and Sir Edward Grey contained a strong Navalist lobby. Navalism was never as incompatible with Liberalism as many radicals liked to claim, and the Royal Navy met other needs besides those of national defense and imperial power—e.g., jobs.⁹

British per capita defense spending before 1914 was the highest of the great European powers, and Navalism was a vital part of Edwardian militarism. Navalism was not just strategic, but was a political and ideological movement to enhance national prestige. In Britain, the most prominent public exponents of Navalism were the popular leagues and political pressure groups.

The British Navy League, the Imperial Maritime League, and the National Service League could justly claim in 1914 more members and adherents than any political party of the period. Public confidence in the Royal Navy sharply increased in the aftermath of the Boer War and the British Army’s less-than-stellar performance.

The Ambivalent Navalist

No British politician had a longer relationship with the Royal Navy in the twentieth century than did Churchill, even though as a youth he had been an “army man.” As late as 1909, Leo Maxse’s National Review attacked ministerial leaders of the “Little Navy Party,” citing David Lloyd George and Churchill.¹⁰

In April 1909, The Times published a letter from Churchill, then president of the Board of Trade, arguing against any British naval-building rivalry with the ambitious United States of America.¹¹ At the same moment, Churchill pleaded with the Admiralty for naval contracts to relieve the unemployment in the Clyde and Tyne naval yards.

In 1909, the “Naval question” had severe competition from a variety of pressing domestic political issues including tariff reform, Irish home rule, social welfare, and women’s rights. Social needs even touched the Royal Navy, with Navy League demands for improved lower-deck catering and visits by League leaders to sample food onboard Mediterranean fleet ships. This event could have sparked the campaign of Churchill and Admiral Sir John Fisher for reform of lower-deck conditions. It was also in 1909 that the naval-building “dreadnought panic” commenced, which ultimately never subsided before the outbreak of war in 1914. The Navalist slogan referring to needed new dreadnoughts was, “We want eight and we won’t wait!” Churchill observed, “The Admiralty had demanded six ships; the economists offered four; and we finally compromised on eight.”¹²

The First Lord of Navalism

By the time Churchill arrived at the Admiralty in October 1911, his view had changed dramatically, and he had adopted a strongly pro-Navalist agenda. This sharp reversal of attitude did not escape Lloyd George, who wrote to Churchill, “You have become a water creature. You think we all live in the sea, and all your thoughts are devoted to sea life, fishes, and other aquatic
creatures. You forget that most of us live on land. "13 When not in London, the First Lord was aboard the Admiralty yacht Enchantress, inspecting ships, naval dockyards, bases, and schools, always asking questions, questions, and more questions.

The Liberal government and Churchill came under Navy League attack for allowing Trafalgar Square to be used for public speeches and demonstrations. Trafalgar Day as a national commemoration had been suggested and promoted by leading Navalists, but George Bernard Shaw had no use for the “Cult of Nelson” and suggested Nelson’s grand column be torn down!

As always completely engaged in his new responsibilities, Churchill became acutely aware of the Imperial German naval threat. With the Agadir Crisis (July 1911), he firmly concluded that Germany was a serious threat to British naval supremacy and to the wider European balance of power. From this crisis point forward, Churchill’s mind was never free of military matters, and—as the British had been for centuries—particularly sensitive to any naval challenge.14 As Churchill himself stated, he went to the Admiralty to “discharge this responsibility for the four most memorable years of my life.”15

As the years passed and war approached, Churchill became increasingly concerned with the German naval challenge, as the arms race intensified and the shrill voices of Navalism grew louder. But he never became a prisoner of the “New Navalism” even as Armageddon approached. In March 1912, he suggested a “Naval Holiday,” by which he meant the temporary suspension of British and German naval building. He reached out to the Canadian and Australian governments for imperial naval support.

The Gathering Storm

In many respects, Churchill and the ruling elites were the “official minds of Navalism,” but they could never totally escape the public pressures and influences that swirled around them.

The methods and organization of the “New Navalism” and Churchill must be placed within the context of the wider European events, which ultimately led to war in the summer of 1914.

Of all the major historical debates of the last century, none has been more attractive to successive generations of historians than the origins of the First World War. It has been described as the seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century. The “New Navalism” had been a major contributor to this catastrophe, and the escalating Anglo-German naval race must be seen as the major underlying force leading to war between London and Berlin. Winston Churchill and his Royal Navy were ready when the confrontation came.

W. Mark Hamilton holds a Ph.D. in International History from the London School of Economics and Political Science and is author of The Nation and the Navy: Methods and Organization of British Navalist Propaganda, 1889–1914 (1986).

Endnotes

10. Ibid., p. 147.
11. Ibid., p. 149.
15. Manchester, p. 431.
Before the outbreak of war in 1914, it was not as a warrior or as a war leader but as a radical liberal reformer that Churchill was best known. First as President of the Board of Trade, where he had introduced labour exchanges, and then as Home Secretary, in which office he had regulated conditions in the coal mines, Churchill had cemented a political reputation based upon tangible measures designed to improve the lives of working people. As such, he was arguably, alongside fellow radical David Lloyd George, one of the main architects of the social security system that prefigured the welfare state.

Did the reform activities for which he was best known continue with his appointment to the Admiralty? Many historians would say not. Malcolm Hill, for example, ends his study Churchill: His Radical Decade with his subject’s departure from the Home Office in 1911. Apparently, nothing radical occurred while Churchill was at the Admiralty. Sebastian Haffner assumes the same, arguing in his excellent appraisal that Churchill’s “radical phase” ended and his warrior phase took its place when he was transferred to the Admiralty. But was this really so? Did this move from one government department to another really mark such a major lacuna in Churchill’s political objectives?

The evidence suggests not. Not only was it highly unlikely that a politician whose identity was so clearly defined by concerns over social welfare should suddenly abandon all interest in such matters, but the nature of the Royal Navy in 1911 meant that Churchill was taking on the leadership of an organization where long-standing regulations and existing conditions of service provided plenty of scope for a minister interested in the progressive enhancement of working practices to find outlets for such concerns. Unsurprisingly, Churchill quickly identified many areas of naval life where a radical reformer such as he could leave a mark. He proceeded to do so.

Crime and Punishment

One of the first areas to attract Churchill’s attention was the archaic means that existed to enforce discipline. This had changed radically during the nineteenth century. Contrary to the caricature of a hidebound service holding fast to outmoded and brutal traditions, vicious and humiliating punishments like flogging with the cat o’nine tails had been suspended for adult sailors midway through Queen Victoria’s reign in response both to the more humanitarian spirit of the age and also to the fact that, in an era when ratings had to be recruited by voluntary enlistment, severe forms of corporal punishment were a barrier to securing the necessary manpower.

Yet if the worst of the past had been cast away well before Churchill took office, that did not mean that the system worked well. Two of the then prevailing punishments were sources of particular and frequent complaint. The first was disrating. This was a summary punishment—that is to say, one that could be awarded by a ship’s captain without recourse to trial by court martial—that when applied to a petty officer not only led to loss of rank, standing, seniority, and pay, but also had adverse implications for future pension rights. For obvious reasons, that such a severe penalty with such far-reaching implications could be applied by the mere whim of a senior officer—and the charge was levelled that some captains did arbitrarily and carelessly employ this sanction—was much disliked by the rank and file of the Navy, where it was regarded as a major grievance. No
Admiral Sir Ernest Troubridge

Admiral Sir Frederick Brock

less disliked, albeit for different reasons, was punishment 10A—sometimes referred to as the “blacklist”—which involved, among other things, segregating wrong-doers, giving them reduced rations, and awarding them mindless tasks, like standing on the deck facing the paintwork for hours on end. Enforcing this punishment required time and effort, but, as many reform-minded officers and officials pointed out, all that was often achieved by such a measure was to create a community of spirit among the worst characters on board any given ship. Like disrating, it was thus a punishment in need of urgent re-examination.

A few weeks after Churchill became First Lord, the disrating of a petty officer aboard HMS Lancaster in circumstances that caused considerable discontent aboard that ship shone a spotlight on the inadequacy of the punishment system in the Royal Navy. Eager to bring about improvements, Churchill asked his naval secretary Rear-Admiral Ernest Troubridge to investigate. Troubridge’s report suggested that reforms were necessary, and accordingly Churchill commissioned a more detailed study. Rear-Admiral Frederick Brock, who had experience in such matters, having recently overseen the reform of the naval detention system, was put in charge of a committee charged with investigating all aspects of naval discipline. Their report took six months to complete and was very comprehensive. Consisting of 172 paragraphs spread over twenty-eight pages, it offered a wealth of recommendations, many of which Churchill was pleased to accept. In particular and reflecting the incident that sparked the investigation, petty officers were accorded the right to claim a court martial before being disrated.

The Wages of Men

If the system of punishment attracted Churchill’s attention early in his tenure as First Lord, so too did the even more vexed question of naval pay. When Churchill assumed oversight of the Admiralty, the substantive pay of sailors—that is payment before any supplements derived from good conduct or other badges—was still calculated largely on a scale that had been set in 1853. When account was taken of six decades
of rising prices, this could hardly be called generous and, given that many naval ratings were aware of the greatly increased pay available to dockworkers and sailors in the merchant marine, was unsurprisingly a source of much grumbling in the service and had been for a considerable period of time.

Churchill may well have already been aware of this when he took office, but if not, he soon would be. In November 1911, the naval authorities received their annual petition from the lower deck, the so-called “Naval Magna Carta” for 1912. Among its requests was a call for “a 20 per cent increase of wages…granted to all Lower Deck Ratings having in view the increased cost of living and the increasing difficulties that Lower Deck Ratings find to meet their liabilities.”

Churchill’s predecessor, Reginald McKenna, had routinely batted away all requests in those petitions advanced a scheme that would have cost £574,850. The Treasury refused even to contemplate this and, after several heated exchanges in cabinet and some not very veiled threats of resignation, Churchill secured £386,473 for improving sailors’ pay. While it was less than he wanted, it was more than anyone else had managed in the previous six decades, and it was warmly welcomed in the service.

**Officers and Gentlemen**

A further area of naval life to attract Churchill’s eye was the social composition of the officer corps. By and large, naval officers were drawn from a very narrow stratum of society, namely the wealthy. The reason for this was the high cost of a naval training. Parents who wanted their children to become naval officers were
required to pay for their education at the naval colleges, purchase their uniforms and equipment, and then support them with a healthy allowance when they became midshipmen. Providing such support did not come cheap. Some estimates had it at around £1000 per child entering the Navy; that is over £100,000 in today’s money. This was not something that many could afford, with the result that naval officers were in almost all cases the children of the moneyed classes. This was not just inequitable and thoroughly undemocratic, it was also inefficient. As one Admiralty memorandum put it: “Neither brains, nor character, nor manners are the exclusive endowment of those whose parents can afford to spend £1000 on their education.”2 As many other critics pointed out, if such a system had existed in the eighteenth century, Nelson, a poor parson’s son, would never have entered the Navy.

For Churchill this was not just an injustice worthy of redress, it was a major barrier to solving one of his most pressing problems, namely a shortage of junior officers. The rapid expansion of the fleet to meet the growing German challenge had resulted in the commissioning of an ever greater number of large super-dreadnought battleships. These grey leviathans were impressive (and expensive) symbols of British maritime prowess; they also required large crews, a component of which consisted of ten or so lieutenants of various sorts and specialism. The fact was that there were not enough such officers to go round, and the likelihood of recruiting a sufficient body of extra candidates by traditional means was small. However, as Churchill was well aware, among the rank and file of the Navy were many highly skilled warrant officers and petty officers who were suitable for commissioned rank. All they needed was the opportunity to display their talents and receive the necessary training. Churchill was determined to make sure that they received it.

The result was the introduction of a system for promoting suitable candidates from the lower deck, known as “the mate scheme.” Those selected to take part in it received an allowance for their kit and uniform and underwent training in navigation, gunnery, and torpedo work at the Navy’s expense. If successful they would go to sea with the rank of mate, at which point they could try for their watch-keeping certificate. Once this was attained they would be promoted to lieutenant.

Churchill hoped by such means to appoint 100 lieutenants from the lower deck within three years. The system got off to a slow start. A mere ten had been selected for the process by September 1912. Nevertheless, despite small beginnings, the system had a momentum all its own and, come the outbreak of war, it would be a major source of commissioned officers. More than 500 would have been selected via this route by 1918.

The First Lord of Reform

In advancing a reform agenda that addressed concerns over the system of punishment, raised naval pay for sailors, and offered opportunities for promotion from the ranks, Churchill was definitely not abandoning his long-standing concern over social welfare for a new and exclusive concentration on naval materiel. On the contrary, he was firmly living up to his existing radical reputation by instituting major improvements that significantly enhanced conditions for ordinary sailors. This substantial legacy of achievement has received less attention than it might for the very understandable reason that it was overtaken by the cataclysm of the First World War.

As whole continents geared up for battle and the guns thundered across the globe, the efforts undertaken to prepare for that moment gained greater prominence in people’s perceptions than the minutiae of domestic reform. For assessments of Churchill as First Lord, this means that HMS Queen Elizabeth attracts more notice than the mate scheme; the Royal Naval Air Service has greater retrospective traction than an extra 3d a day for an ordinary seaman; and the switch from coal to oil commands more attention than whether disrating could be imposed summarily or only after trial by court martial. That may be so, but Churchill’s achievements in pushing for social improvements in the pre-war Royal Navy were substantial nonetheless. 

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Endnotes
On 7 August 1914, under safe cover of British cruisers and naval aircraft, the Admiralty set about the massive task of transporting the British Expeditionary Force across the English Channel to France. Between then and 27 August, the Royal Navy, without the loss of a man or damage to the ships, safely deployed 120,000 men plus supplies, transport, weapons, munitions, and other equipment across the Channel. It had been a wonderful operation on a scale previously undreamed of, and it had been conducted in such secrecy that the German Supreme Command confidently told its mobile army headquarters in Belgium that no landing of British troops on a large scale had yet taken place. This was on the eve of the first British shot on the continent, near Mons, on 22 August. Admiral Lord Fisher, the once-and-future First Sea Lord, liked to say that the Army was a projectile to be fired by the Navy. Here lay proof of that.

The BEF commenced its concentration, taking up its intended position on the north and west flank of the French army. The German army’s push to defeat the French army was halted at the Battle of the Marne. In a whirl of movements, the front shifted north and into Belgium, leaving exposed the hugely important Channel ports. If Germany could get possession of Antwerp, it would gain immeasurable power in waters opposite the River Thames. German staff knew that Antwerp must be taken to safeguard the right rear of their armies swinging down into France. As First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill signalled Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, commanding the Grand Fleet, to contemplate the proper positioning of his ships if the Germans were to take measures to control the Channel coast.

Churchill’s Vision

Churchill grasped the realities of the German sweep towards the Belgian frontier. He had true instincts for making war, and the instincts for taking the initiative. He had his pet schemes, and the Admiralty gave him almost unlimited scope to carry them out. On 2 August, the Admiralty authorized the formation of the “Flying Column” Royal Marines, from which developed the Royal Marines Brigade, something of a private army for Churchill. He also had his own air wing, the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), and he could do very much as he liked with these resources.

At the outset of the war Churchill had established a naval air station at Ostend, where he deployed airplanes and an airship. This was seen as critical in matters of surveillance and communications, as it was designed to keep a watch out for any German naval movements, including submarines, and to give early warning. Under the direction of Commander C. R. Samson, airplanes made reconnaissance flights daily over the area between Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres. On the ground, using two cars, one of them fitted with a Maxim gun, Samson made a reconnaissance as far as Bruges. Churchill considered it essential to deny Zeppelins the use of space within a hundred miles of Dunkirk. Churchill’s obligations were widening quickly. On 3 September, Secretary of State for War Lord Kitchener asked Churchill to take responsibility for the aerial defence of the United Kingdom. Churchill agreed, and so was in charge of all Royal Flying Corps aircraft engaged in the defence of the home islands, plus searchlights and anti-aircraft guns, as well as the RNAS.

Churchill was the apostle of the offensive and soon began considering landing forces on other coasts. Within a week, he was advocating formation of a naval brigade, using naval reservists, which would be built around the existing Marine brigade and under Admiralty control. It would serve alongside the Army, occupying advanced naval bases. At this early stage, the best Churchill could get from the Board of Admiralty was approval for a naval demonstration in an effort to distract the Germans: the Marine Brigade was landed at the port of Ostend on 26 August, where it stayed for a week. This was half a loaf. A modified form of Churchill’s plan was later carried out, but it was on too small a scale to have any dramatic effect on German movements. This episode showed how Churchill “could overrule his naval experts, that he hungered for action, and that he ignored naval advice.”1 All the plans, schemes, and rules for the conduct of war that had been worked out for years at the Naval War College in Greenwich and at Portsmouth, and of limited, combined, and amphibious warfare, were now dead. Political expediency had supplanted sound military thought and practice. Politics deflected strategy. Churchill proceeded with his designs.
On 7 September The Times announced formation of a force of 15,000 men called the Naval Brigades. These grew into the Royal Naval Division, consisting of the 1st Brigade (Battalions: Benbow, Collingwood, Hawke, and Drake) and 2nd Brigade (Battalions: Howe, Hood, Anson, and Nelson). “Mr. Churchill, with characteristic genius and energy, has decided to take advantage of this patriotic feeling [of young men wanting to join the Navy]...the nucleus of which will be found in existing reserves for the naval services which cannot be given employment afloat at present.” The Royal Marines, which had been at Ostend, formed a third brigade.

Lord Fisher, then living in Richmond, Surrey, was drawn into the scheme. On 6 September he wrote to his son to say that Churchill had called him: “Winston Churchill got me on the phone this morning and wants me to be the head of something—some sort of Naval Brigade, I think...but the telephone not very clear. He said he had written, but I had never got the letter. Probably some German spy postman has sent it to Berlin!” A lunch at the Admiralty was set for discussion of it with Churchill. Fisher was made the honorary colonel of the 1st Royal Naval Brigade.

The formation of the Naval Brigades came as a stopgap, for the BEF did not have the force in strength that had been anticipated (two divisions were held back in England for territorial defence). Four divisions of infantry plus the cavalry division were despatched to the Continent. Churchill’s argument was that if the sailors were not needed at sea, they could be employed with effect on land. With haste they were gathered together and trained as best they could be, but it is generally agreed that they were poorly trained and ill-equipped. Churchill had asked Kitchener for artillery and had even suggested that units in India be brought home to support the Naval Division. Kitchener replied that he had no officers or guns to spare. It was said at the time that these new and largely untrained units would not be used on the continent until the naval situation was entirely favourable to the Allies. As the days of August advanced, however, and as German successes became manifest, it was clear the Naval Brigades would soon be deployed.

Our story now shifts to the left flank of the Allied armies and to the double and interlocking story of “the Dunkirk circus” (or as Churchill renamed it “the Dunkirk guerrilla”) and origins of Churchill’s Antwerp adventure—the whole forming a chapter in British military operations that has always been on the margins of history. Official histories spurn it. It is an episode in which Churchill played a conspicuous part. As events proved, it did him little credit, engulfed as he was in the tumultuous events of those early months of the war. Fisher later wrote that the BEF ought to have gone to Antwerp rather than to the Ypres salient, and he may have been right. But in the circumstances of the unfolding war, the requirement to come to France’s immediate aid did not allow for a Belgium operation, and so the die was cast.

On 16 September, Kitchener received a telegram from General Joffre of the French high command asking for reinforcements to be sent to Dunkirk to confuse the Germans as to the strength of the defences and threaten their lines of communication. Churchill later maintained...
that the Dunkirk Circus did not originate with him but was the result of other factors. This is correct: Kitchener consulted Churchill. What was needed, besides reinforcing the Dunkirk garrison, were mobile forces that could display power by mobile arrangements and create diversions. Churchill sent the Royal Marines Brigade and insisted that a force of Yeomanry also be sent. Thus it was that the Oxfordshire Hussars, mobilized on 4 August and in which his brother Jack Churchill was a major, came to be part of the operation. A charming sidelight on the Churchills’ own regiment was recounted by General J. F. C. Fuller, the noted historian of war:

I remember when the Oxford Hussars embarked, they brought with them a vast quantity of kit: tin uniform boxes, suitcases and cabin trunks, as if they were on their way round the world. Someone questioned the loading of this baggage, whereupon a red-faced Major burst into my office in a towering rage: “This is simply damnable!” he shouted. “Winston said we could take ’em, and now one of your prize B. F.s says we can’t....” “All right! All right!” I cut him short. “What is the trouble about?” And having ascertained what the First Lord of the Admiralty had sanctioned, I telephoned down to the A. E. S. O. in charge to load the officers’ trousseaux—a word which did not seem to please my furious friend. All were loaded, and, I believe, a week later were unpacked by German hands.  

It was also arranged that fifty London motorbuses would be sent with them to make the sailor-soldiers as mobile and conspicuous as possible as they rumbled through Ypres, Lille, Tournai, and Douai. The whole business constituted a demonstration, or a feint, designed
to give an ostentatious display of a British Army arriving and thereby warding off a German approach to Belgium and the adjacent French coast. Using air reconnaissance and cover, and employing mobile squads, the intention was to give an appearance of something greater than it actually was. Churchill could supply the naval air as required. The Royal Marines were disembarked at Dunkirk on the night of 19 and 20 September. They gave aid to the RNAS unit that had a squad of fifty armoured Rolls-Royce motorcars. These mounted Vickers machine guns, and some of them carried mounted armoured plate slung in such a way that they could bridge cuts in the road deliberately excavated by German units. (A hint of the development of the tank shows itself here.) Jack’s squadron of Oxfordshire Hussars acted as an escort to the naval air squadron commanded by Captain C. R. Samson. The ranging sorties of these cars with armour plating discomfited the Germans, causing them to withdraw, but at the same time attracted the attention of the German higher command. Three squadrons of RNAS bombarded German defences from bases in northern France. And from its base at Dunkirk, the naval air wing soon began to take the war to the enemy’s air power. Twelve aircraft stationed at Dunkirk flew missions of destruction against Zeppelin bases, and put advance German air bases and refuelling depots being constructed in Belgium out of commission.

Winston Takes Command

Churchill took an active part in directing these operations, crossing the Channel frequently in the cruiser Adventurer to confirm the force’s needs were adequately provided for, and at one stage intervening to make sure that heavy lorries and additional buses were sent. It was a successful operation, but the Royal Marines were withdrawn three days later, and were embarked in the 7th Battlecruiser Squadron, the same units that had ferried them across the Channel. Worries that the cruisers posed too tempting a target brought the amphibious operation to an end. From this early episode we find the genesis and evolution of “the Dunkirk circus”—with Churchill at the centre of operations and decision-making.

Asquith, said his daughter Violet, referred to Churchill’s Dunkirk force as “his own little army,” which is true. It was rather clear to his critics (sitting more comfortably in London) that he was engaging in what might be called “Winston’s little war,” and he waged it with intensity and imagination. While many of his cabinet colleagues recoiled at thoughts of a continental war and others sought alliances to serve the interests of the nation, Churchill plunged right in and proceeded to act strongly and independently, a tendency supported by his powerful office at the Admiralty. The Battle of the Marne checked the German race to the sea and took the pressure off Dunkirk, but now the worrying scene shifted north along the coast towards Antwerp. Napoleon had seen this Belgian city as “a pistol pointed at the heart of England,” and Churchill, fully conversant with Napoleon’s thinking on these matters, realized that the coast and the Channel ports in enemy hands would threaten the security of the British Isles. From the British perspective, precious Antwerp had to be held. At the outset of the war he had pressed on his cabinet colleagues the necessity of guarding against German domination there; however, no independent action was possible, as there still was no Allied military strategy in this regards. Meanwhile events were unrolling rapidly. With Kitchener’s nominal support, Churchill’s immediate scheme was to keep the Channel ports in Allied hands. He did great good for this cause and largely succeeded. All the same, the war widened towards vital Antwerp, where Winston played a significant and theatrical role in military and political leadership in a rapidly deteriorating situation against impossible odds of overwhelming enemy numbers and devastating heavy artillery—another story of “Winston’s War” for another time and place. ☮

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Endnotes
2. “Naval Brigade,” The Times, 7 September 1914.
The Baltic is the only theatre in which naval action can appreciably shorten the war.
—Winston Churchill, 22 December 1914

From October 1911 to May 1915 Winston Churchill served as First Lord of the Admiralty—the Royal Navy’s political chief—during which time he proposed a number of imaginative strategic schemes, of which the Dardanelles is by far the most famous. But more central to his strategic thought were his amphibious schemes, which ultimately constituted a grand strategy based on the idea of using Britain’s predominance at sea to defeat Germany. This was a goal he would continue to pursue long after he left the Admiralty.

Brainstorming

There was nothing novel in this concept; the Royal Navy’s strategists had long argued that amphibious attacks on Germany should be Britain’s main contribution to a continental war. In particular, they looked to the Baltic Sea, where British control would cut Germany off from vital shipments of iron ore from Sweden. More importantly, it would allow the Royal Navy to land a Russian army on “a stretch of ten miles of hard sand on the Pomeranian coast which is only ninety miles from Berlin,” in the words of Admiral Sir John Fisher. Such an amphibious assault might bring a quick end to the war, and Churchill took up this idea with enthusiasm. On 19 August 1914, when the war was only two weeks old, he suggested to the Russian Commander-in-Chief, the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, that preparations be made for this operation on the assumption that the Royal Navy would obtain command of the Baltic. And therein lay the rub. As Churchill noted in his message to the Grand Duke: “The Kiel Canal gives the Germans the power of putting their whole naval force either in the North Sea or the Baltic. The British naval strength is not sufficient to provide two Fleets, each individually superior to the German Fleet.”

Sending a British squadron to the Baltic that was strong enough to face the German High Seas Fleet would dangerously weaken the Royal Navy in the North Sea, giving the Germans an opportunity to raid, or even invade, Britain’s coasts. Thus before any attempt could be made to land troops on the Pomeranian coast, either the enemy fleet or the Kiel Canal had to be put out of action. Unfortunately, both tasks were problematic: the German fleet—being weaker than the British—refused to give battle, and the Kiel Canal was well defended. It was to solve this conundrum that Churchill eventually incorporated another element in his strategy: seizing an island base off the German coast.

Gaining such an “oversea” base had also been studied before the war, and several candidates had been identified. The best of these was Heligoland, a small island about twenty-five miles north of the German coast that gave its name to the surrounding waters, the Heligoland Bight. But it was considered virtually impregnable—a conference on 17 September 1914 concluded that “the reduction of Heligoland would involve far more serious losses in capital ships than would compensate for any advantage gained.”

The defenses of Sylt, off the Schleswig coast, and Borkum, the westernmost of the German Frisian Islands, were far less formidable, but both were vulnerable to long-range artillery fire from the nearby mainland, which would make them difficult to hold even if they were captured. So while some fire-eating admirals continued to argue for seizing an island base, the Naval War Staff had largely given up on the idea before the war began.

Not so Churchill, although at first he saw the oversea base as an entirely separate matter from the Baltic operation. In a memorandum dated 9 August 1914, for example, Churchill strongly urged capturing a forward base, primarily because it would make it possible for British destroyers, submarines, and aircraft to maintain a close watch on German activities in the Heligoland Bight. Moreover, it would “maintain in lively vigour the spirit of enterprise and attack” among the Royal Navy’s officers and men. At a meeting of the War Council on 1 December 1914, Churchill further noted that constant monitoring of German naval activity from such a base would eliminate any possibility of a surprise invasion, something that still worried the British army’s leadership. Having gained the War Council’s approval, Churchill charged the navy’s staff on 2 December 1914 with
working out plans for seizing Sylt. His directive repeated the main points of his 9 August memo, but he added a new notion, a method for coping with enemy artillery fire from the mainland: gunfire from the new monitors—shallow-draft vessels mounting a pair of battleship-caliber guns in a single turret—would prevent the Germans from constructing gun emplacements within range of the islands. The monitors were one of Churchill’s brainchildren, intended for just such inshore operations, and were fitted with enormous “bulges” that made them resistant to mines and torpedoes.

**A Mining Operation**

Undergirding all these schemes was the assumption that seizing an island base would provoke the German fleet to come out and offer battle, giving the more powerful Grand Fleet the long-sought opportunity of destroying its foe in a decisive battle. But by December 1914, it seemed increasingly unlikely that even the capture of an island would compel the enemy to action. That realization may have inspired Churchill to seek a different solution to neutralizing the German fleet, for on the 22nd he wrote to Admiral Fisher suggesting that after capturing an island, the Royal Navy could “block them [i.e., the German ships] in à la Wilson.” This was a reference to Admiral of the Fleet Sir Arthur Wilson, a retired officer who was serving as a special adviser to the Admiralty; he had been advocating using dense minefields off the German harbors to prevent their fleet from putting to sea. Up until this point Churchill had opposed Wilson’s scheme, writing in October 1914:

> It is not possible to blockade a modern fleet by mining, even on a very large scale, unless superior force is maintained in the neighbourhood of the minefield to prevent the mines being removed….It would not be possible to keep such a watch now without exposing the vessels so engaged to almost certain destruction from the enemy’s submarines.7

On another occasion Churchill noted that “We have never laid [a mine] we have not afterwards regretted.”8

But by the end of December 1914 he had modified his stance on mining, combining it with other elements of his strategy—an island base, monitors, a Baltic landing—and adding yet another, the “new army” that Field Marshal Kitchener was training; between this force and the Territorials, it was anticipated that an army of
half a million men would be ready by March 1915. In a memorandum to Prime Minister Asquith dated 29 December 1914, Churchill asked, “Are there not other alternatives than sending our armies to chew barbed wire in Flanders?” In this memo, and another submitted a couple of days later, Churchill laid out his favored alternative; boiled down, it amounted to the following:

1. Capture an island off the German coast—Borkum was now his first choice—and sow mines “on the most extensive scale” in all the German exits to the North Sea; these minefields would be protected by the destroyers and submarines operating from the new base. One of the major points he stressed in pressing for an island base was that its proximity to German harbors would allow the smaller, short-ranged B and C class submarines, used defensively up to this point, to take on an offensive role, practically quadrupling the British submarine force operating in enemy waters;

2. “The German fleet having been effectually excluded from the North Sea…Schleswig-Holstein could be invaded in force, & an advance made on the Kiel Canal”—this force presumably to be Kitchener’s new army;

3. Denmark would then be invited to join the Allies, with the promise that Schleswig-Holstein would be returned to her;

4. Danish cooperation having been secured, a powerful British fleet would enter the Baltic, “thus cutting Germany off from all Northern supplies”;

5. The final act would be the landing of a Russian army “at various points on the Baltic shore less than 100 miles from Berlin.”

Furthermore, the monitors would play an important role in capturing and defending the oversea base; their gunfire, guided by aerial reconnaissance, would prevent the Germans from placing heavy guns on the nearby mainland.

No Sale

While the War Council approved his project “in principle” on 7 January 1915, Churchill had a difficult time convincing his naval colleagues that the operation was feasible. He needed buy-in from Admiral Jellicoe, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet, and in January the two exchanged a series of letters on the subject. Churchill repeatedly tried to convince Jellicoe that his fleet would be involved only as a distant covering force, leaving it free to tackle the German fleet if it sortied; the invasion and defense of the island would be accomplished by a special bombarding force of old battleships and monitors along with powerful destroyer and submarine flotillas. “Having taken the island in question,” Churchill wrote on 11 January, “we must make it the most dreaded lair of S/Ms [submarines] in the world.” Jellicoe, however, remained unconvinced; while he realized “the immense advantages” of an island base, he questioned the ability to hold one so close to Germany and so far from Britain.

The Naval War Staff also opposed the plan; Captain Herbert Richmond, the Assistant Director of the Operations Division, noted that Borkum was defended by substantial batteries, and that silencing those batteries by naval bombardment would be difficult due to the prevailing hazy weather and the lack of landmarks on the flat and featureless island. Admiral Fisher, the First Sea Lord, also expressed doubts, noting that “Even the older ships should not be risked, for they cannot be lost without losing men, and they form the only reserve behind the Grand Fleet.”

By the end of January 1915 the Dardanelles campaign was taking shape, and Churchill was much involved in its planning; but he remained convinced that the capture of an island base, followed by the neutralization of the German fleet by extensive mining off its harbors, would be the first steps in a war-winning amphibious strategy. He continued to tinker with the plan, and on 24 March 1915—a week after the disastrous naval assault on the
Dardanelles—he wrote a long memorandum outlining the entire operation. Although he did not explicitly mention it, recent Russian defeats on the Eastern Front must have influenced his thinking, since there was no longer any mention of landing a Russian army in Pomerania; instead, the “decisive military stroke” would come from a British force “not less than 500,000 strong,” which would be landed at Emden and then advance on Berlin, or into Westphalia.\(^{14}\) Planning for the operation apparently continued until Churchill was forced out of his post as First Lord of the Admiralty on 26 May 1915.

Never Give In

But Borkum remained in his thoughts. After he returned to the government as Minister of Munitions in July 1917, Churchill immediately submitted a long memorandum to the War Cabinet, “Naval War Policy, 1917,” in which he again advocated a greatly modified version of his strategy. By this time the United States had entered the war, and with the addition of the US Navy to the Allied cause, Churchill calculated that two complete battle fleets could be formed, each more powerful than the German fleet. He proposed:

One of these fleets should be a fast blue water fleet, like our present Grand Fleet, for maintaining supremacy of the seas...; the other should be fitted with bulges and thus rendered comparatively torpedo proof, in order to discharge the functions of an Inshore Aggressive Fleet.\(^{15}\)

This second fleet would assist in capturing both Borkum and Sylt and then supporting the blockade of the German ports by an extensive mining campaign—which would also bottle up the enemy’s U-boats, thereby putting an end to their campaign against Allied shipping. Next, Denmark and/or the Netherlands would be invited to join the Allies, supported by a British army, for an attack on Germany. If capturing the islands was thought too difficult, Churchill suggested forming an artificial island base from concrete caissons—a foreshadowing of the Mulberry harbors of the Second World War. None of his ideas, however, was taken up.

When Churchill returned to the Admiralty as First Lord in September 1939, he proposed Operation Catherine, which incorporated some of his First World War strategic ideas. The core idea was to send a squadron built around battleships fitted with anti-torpedo bulges into the Baltic. A great deal of staff work was devoted to this operation, but any such attempt would have been disastrous in the face of the greatly increased effectiveness of air power. Catherine, like Churchill’s schemes for Baltic operations in the First World War, never got past the planning stage.

Amphibian Evolution

Churchill’s grand strategy was probably never really feasible; the objections raised by his naval advisers were real and cogent. But in the process of assembling his schemes, he demonstrated the characteristics that would make him an outstanding leader in the Second World War: imagination, an eagerness to take advantage of technological innovations, an openness to adopting the ideas of others and adapting them to his purposes, and a constant search for the offensive, for gaining what he termed “moral” superiority over the enemy. The evolution of his amphibious schemes therefore marks a definite step in his development as a strategist.  

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**Endnotes**

3. *WSC III, C(1)*, p. 45.
15. CAB/24/19.
One of the most damning charges regularly levelled against Winston Churchill for his role in the Dardanelles campaign is that he either ignored or overruled his principal naval advisers, who unanimously warned of disaster if a naval offensive were launched without troops to support it. Churchill always insisted that this was untrue, that he had had the support of the admirals. But there is almost no hard evidence to back him up. No minutes were taken of the deliberations among Churchill and his top naval advisers in early January 1915, when the proposal to force the Dardanelles by ships alone was first considered at the Admiralty. Historians have therefore had to rely on later testimony from the participants to reconstruct what happened.

The best—though far from perfect—source we have on these deliberations is the voluminous testimony provided to the official Dardanelles Commission, established by an Act of Parliament in 1916 to investigate why the campaign had been launched, and what had gone wrong. Over the course of twenty days, from September to December 1916, the Commission examined thirty-five witnesses, including all the surviving members of Asquith’s War Council, as well as the admirals who had taken part in the Admiralty’s decision-making process. Did they complain that Churchill had failed to heed repeated warnings that the naval offensive was doomed? A recent study of Churchill’s part in the Dardanelles campaign claims that the testimony of naval leaders “leaves no doubt” that their “opposition to a purely naval operation at the Dardanelles by Fisher, Jackson and all of the naval experts, had been neither half-hearted nor hesitating.”

Is this an accurate summary of naval testimony? The officials who testified to the Commission in 1916 certainly had a strong incentive to disavow responsibility for launching a naval operation that had clearly been a failure, so it would hardly be surprising if they had thrown all the blame onto Churchill’s shoulders. But after reviewing transcripts of their testimony, Churchill was confident that the Commission would have to absolve him of blame. At the end of November, he wrote to his friend Archie Sinclair that the Commission’s first public report, which would address the origins of the campaign, would be released soon, “and I have good hopes that it will be a fair judgment.”

Was this merely wishful thinking? The records of the Commission’s hearings reveal that the former First Lord had good reason to be optimistic.

The Witnesses

The first admiral to comment on the Dardanelles project in the early days of 1915 had been Vice-Admiral Sir Sackville Carden, commander of the navy’s Eastern Mediterranean Squadron. Churchill asked Carden on 3 January whether he thought “the forcing of the Dardanelles by ships alone” would be “a practicable operation.” It is often said that Churchill framed his query in a deliberately leading manner, so that Carden would be compelled to support the operation. Some writers go so far as to suggest that Carden was somehow “coerced” into going along with the idea against his better judgement.

Churchill never denied that he had hoped for a positive response when he sent his query, but he dismissed the idea that a high-ranking naval officer would meekly go along with a proposal he disliked simply because it had originated with the First Lord. And he had good reason to adopt this view. In the first four months of the War, Churchill had grown accustomed to his recommendations being shot down by his naval advisers. When the Dardanelles Commission asked Carden whether he regarded Churchill’s telegram as an order, the admiral replied that he “took it as an inquiry.…I formed the opinion that the First Lord wished it to be done if it could possibly be done.” Carden was then asked: “Did you take that as in any way fettering your discretion in giving your opinion?” His reply was a simple “No.”

The Dardanelles proposal was subsequently reviewed by members of Churchill’s “War Group”—an informal body that included the First Lord of the Admiralty, the
First Sea Lord (Admiral of the Fleet “Jacky” Fisher),
the Chief of the Admiralty War Staff (Vice-Admiral Sir
Henry Oliver), Churchill’s naval secretary (Commodore
Charles de Bartolomé), and two other senior admirals
then serving at the Admiralty, Sir Arthur Wilson and Sir
Henry Jackson.

The junior member of this group, Bartolomé, was the
first to testify. He told the Commission that he would
have preferred the Dardanelles offensive to be launched
as a combined army-navy operation, but he admitted that
he had nevertheless been “in favour of the gradual bom-
ardment of the [Dardanelles] forts [by ships alone],”
provided the attack could be cancelled if it was not suc-
cessful.4

Oliver’s testimony also supported Churchill’s version
of events. When the Chief of Staff was asked if he con-
sidered himself responsible for the decision to launch the
naval attack, he stated unequivocally: “Yes, I consider I
have got responsibility. If I thought the First Lord and the
First Sea Lord were bent on doing something which ap-
peared to me highly imprudent, I should have my opinion
recorded that I was not in agreement with it.” One of the
Commissioners subsequently asked Oliver if the entire
War Group had agreed to the offensive. “To the best of
my recollection,” Oliver replied, “yes.”5

Admiral Wilson’s position was somewhat more dif-
ficult to pin down. He claimed that he had always been
“moderately adverse” to the Dardanelles operation, but
admitted that he had not opposed it on practical grounds.
“I thought it was a possible success,” he stated,

and, of course, it was a very big prize to work for, and

the risks were not great provided we were prepared to
leave off when we saw we could not get through. In
fact, the risk was really very little more than the loss of
prestige, which always attaches to a failure, but I did
not expect it would be anything serious.6

Wilson testified that his main objection to the Darda-
nelles scheme was that it would tie up resources he want-
ed to use for an assault on the German or Belgian coasts,
not that it was likely to fail. He clearly had no objections
to inshore operations and coastal bombardments in prin-
ciple. Wilson confirmed that when Carden’s proposal first
arrived at the Admiralty, he had agreed it was worth ex-
amining further.7

The most important naval witness was the former
First Sea Lord, Lord Fisher, whose resignation in May
1915 had forced Churchill from the Admiralty. By late
1916, the admiral was eager to avoid a clash with his for-
mer chief, with whom he had recently reconciled, and the
two men had taken care to coordinate their testimony
beforehand so as not to incriminate or contradict one an-
other. Fisher said nothing to the Commission that would
undermine Churchill’s account. He confirmed that the
naval staff had, in fact, supported the operation, as Chur-
chill claimed. “I am perfectly certain,” he stated, “…that I
was the only one who stood out against it.”8

The opposition of the First Sea Lord to the Darda-
nelles proposal would have weakened Churchill’s position
if Fisher himself had not downplayed its significance. He
stated that he had made his dislike of his project known to
his subordinates, but admitted that he had not given the
proposal much personal attention. “To a large extent,” he
said, “having expressed my indisposition to have much
to do with it, I more or less left it alone. Sir Henry Jack-
son was a very able man, and so was Admiral Oliver, and
I more or less stood aside. I backed it up in every possible
way as far as executive work was concerned.”9

Fisher’s admission that he had not actively opposed
the plan, despite his misgivings, was critical to Churchill’s
case. Just as importantly, at no point did Fisher say he
had warned the First Lord that the Dardanelles assault
was likely to be a costly failure. His main concern, he told
the Commission, was that the proposed operation in the
Eastern Mediterranean would prevent him from launch-
ing an offensive in the Baltic Sea, which he considered a
better use of Britain’s naval resources. William Pickford,
one of the Commissioners, pressed Fisher on this point
during the hearings. “You had no objection,” Pickford
asked, “to the experiment suggested by Mr. Churchill on the strength of Admiral Carden’s opinion, being tried?”

Fisher: That is right, only I always had the feeling that there would be a loss of ships, and I wanted to have them to lose in the decisive theatre.

Pickford: Still you did not object to the experiment being tried?

Fisher: No.10

When the Commission sought corroboration of Fisher’s testimony from the other members of the War Group, all agreed that the First Sea Lord had not actively opposed the scheme in its early stages. Indeed, they could not definitely say what Fisher’s views on the operation had been, although Bartolomé and Jackson recalled that their impression at the time was that the First Sea Lord disliked the idea.11 If the First Sea Lord had voiced doubts about the operation in early January, they could have made little impression on his colleagues.

The only naval testimony to cause Churchill serious discomfort was that offered by Henry Jackson, who had succeeded Fisher as First Sea Lord in May 1915, and still held that post when he appeared before the Commission. Jackson had prepared a detailed memorandum on the Dardanelles scheme on 5 January 1915. This document predicted that a British fleet attempting to rush the Straits would likely suffer significant losses, and might subsequently find itself cut off in the Sea of Marmara, short of fuel and ammunition, without any effective means to force an Ottoman surrender.

Under examination by the Dardanelles Commission, Jackson insisted that he had always been strongly opposed to any attempt to force the Dardanelles without an army. And he denied having stated any other view in conversation with Churchill. “I have always stuck to that Memorandum,” he maintained. “I have never changed that opinion, and I have never given anybody any reason to think I did.”12 But Jackson’s claims were undermined by another memorandum he had written on 15 January, in which he examined Carden’s plan for forcing the Straits and recommended that the operation be attempted. Under questioning, it became clear that Jackson was not distinguishing between an attempt to rush the Straits, the subject of his first memorandum, and Carden’s more cautious plan for a gradual neutralization of the enemy’s defences, the plan he endorsed ten days later.

Churchill was eager to ensure that the Commission
understood that Jackson’s two memoranda dealt with substantially different proposals. And he sought to discredit the new First Sea Lord’s claim that he had always opposed the operation. When the Commission allowed Churchill to cross-examine Admiral Oliver on 25 October, he asked the Chief of Staff about Jackson’s role in the planning process: “You were in close touch with Jackson?,” he asked. “Yes,” Oliver answered. “He worked in a room near mine and I had frequent conversations with him and I saw all his work, which was done with the greatest care and exactitude.”

To Churchill’s delight, Oliver confirmed that he (Oliver) and Jackson had been “in general agreement” about the Dardanelles plan. Churchill came back to this point at the end of his questioning.

Churchill: Did Admiral Jackson ever express any opinion to you against this operation…?

Oliver: We often discussed the Dardanelles—very frequently.

Churchill: Would you gather he was for or against it; can you give us his general opinion—whether he was for or against it?

Oliver: I should say he was for it.

Findings

When the Commission wrapped up its first batch of hearings in December 1916, Churchill was not in the least dismayed by the testimony of his former naval advisers. Fisher and Wilson had admitted to giving the Dardanelles project at least qualified support in its early stages, while Oliver and Bartolome confirmed that they had consistently supported the operation. Only Jackson had attempted to distance himself from the decision to launch the offensive, but Churchill was confident that this testimony had been discredited. He told Asquith, “We have got him [Jackson] tighter than anybody else on paper…. I gather the Commission were very unfavourably impressed by his efforts to wriggle out” of his written support for Carden’s plan on 15 January.

Churchill was confident that he had disproven charges that he had championed the naval offensive in the face of strong opposition from the First Sea Lord and other Admiralty officials. The Commission’s first report, issued in February 1917, therefore came as a bitter disappointment. The document accepted much of Churchill’s account of the decision-making process at the Admiralty, noting that no member of the naval staff had “dissented from the bombardment of the outer forts.” But it added that “Their concurrence was not apparently very cordial,” even if there could be “no doubt that it was given.” The report went on to criticize Churchill for having pressed the Dardanelles scheme on the government based on what it described as “a certain amount of half-hearted and hesitating expert opinion.”

Churchill complained that this verdict did not accurately reflect the testimony collected by the Commission, and he was right to do so. Based on the sworn evidence from members of the “War Group,” Churchill could reasonably claim that there had been a genuine consensus at the Admiralty in the first two weeks of January 1915 that the Dardanelles scheme should be adopted.
As Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1920s, Churchill fought a campaign against the Admiralty’s shipbuilding plans. He seemed much more interested in the Royal Air Force than the Royal Navy when he adopted rearmament as a cause in the 1930s. Only late in the decade did Lord Chatfield, the First Sea Lord masterminding naval rearmament, mobilise Churchill to the navy’s cause by granting him access to secrets and obtaining his support for a successful campaign to bring the Fleet Air Arm under full naval control. Given this somewhat chequered record, the signal “Winston is back!”—often believed but not proven to have been sent out to the fleet in 1939—would have been as much a warning to senior officers as a morale booster for the younger generation.

A Privilege and Honour

Churchill was visibly moved by his return to the Admiralty. Third Sea Lord Bruce Fraser remembered: “As he took the First Lord’s chair in the famous Board Room, Churchill was filled with emotion. To a few words of welcome from the First Sea Lord [Sir Dudley Pound], he replied by saying what a privilege and honour it was to be again in that chair, that there were many difficulties together we would overcome. He surveyed critically each of us in turn and then, adding he would see us all later on, he adjourned the meeting, ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘to your tasks and duties.’”

Churchill certainly introduced much greater dynamism into the higher direction of the Royal Navy. Captain G. R. G. Allen, Deputy Director of the Trade Division of the Naval Staff, remembered: “One thing [that] remains firmly in my mind about Winston’s arrival at the Admiralty was the immediate impact he made on the Staff at all levels, both service and civilian. From the very first day, even I in my subordinate situation became aware of this presence, and I among others began to receive little notes signed by W. S. C. from the private office demanding reports of progress direct to him. If the required report was a good one (and it would not necessarily be one’s fault if it were not) one might get a reply in red ink—’vg press on.’ It was like the stone thrown into the pond, the ripples go out in all directions, galvanizing peoples at all levels to ‘press on’—and they did.”

Churchill’s enthusiasm sometimes got the better of him, and many officers resented his interference with what they regarded as professional matters. The First Lord’s relationship with Admiral Pound was crucial. This has been a matter of some controversy among historians. Pound suited Churchill. The First Sea Lord was himself a great centralizer and prone to “back seat driving” of operations. Certainly the First Lord’s instincts to micro-manage the navy’s activities fitted in with Pound’s own command style. Professor Chris Bell, always scrupulously fair, puts it thus: “It is virtually impossible now to deter-
mine which signals originated with Pound, which with Churchill, and which were genuinely joint efforts.”3 It is significant, nevertheless, that Pound’s generally supportive biographer concluded that “Churchill was allowed to intervene in operations far more than Pound should have been prepared to accept.”4

**Baltic Leanings**

There was only one major disagreement where Pound managed to curb the First Lord. This was Operation Catherine, the plan to send a powerful fleet of surface units based around strengthened “R” class battleships into the Baltic to interrupt German communications with Sweden. In its basics, this was a good idea, as it was known how much Germany—without enough steel for its war making purposes—depended on Swedish supplies. Asserting sea control in the Baltic might well have been a winning strategy—if it had been practical. Baltic operations had been considered in the First World War but had never been attempted except by submarines, mainly because of the failure to destroy the High Seas Fleet. In 1939, Germany was much weaker in surface forces, but the underwater threat from U-boats and mines combined with the air threat from operating so close to Luftwaffe bases was prohibitive.

Churchill put the recently retired admiral William Boyle, by then the Earl of Cork and Orrery, in charge of a planning committee. Boyle was optimistic, but Pound and the Naval Staff were unwilling to take potentially useful capital ships out of service for conversion as long as there was a possibility of Italy or Japan widening the war. In December, Pound recommended that Boyle’s committee be disbanded. Churchill refused. In doing so, he made several strategic points: “The entry into the Baltic…would soon bring the raiders home and give us measureless relief. If we allow ourselves indefinitely to be confined to an absolute defensive by far weaker forces, we shall simply be worried and worn down while making huge demands upon the national resources. I could never be responsible for a naval strategy which excluded the offensive principle and relegated us to keeping open the lines of communication and maintaining the blockade.”5

Churchill broadened the Boyle Committee’s remit to examine all potentially offensive schemes. Operation Catherine, however, was effectively abandoned on 23 January 1940. Captain V. H. Danckwerts, the able Director of Plans of the Naval Staff, became the main casualty. Having argued cogently against the Baltic offensive, he
was sacrificed to the First Lord’s enthusiasm. A rather
guilty Pound arranged for Dankwerts to obtain a good
command, the aircraft carrier Furious.

That Sinking Feeling

The Royal Navy had a mixed record under the
leadership of Churchill and Pound. Churchill
preferred the hunter-killer approach to counter
the U-boat threat to the tried system of defended con-
voys, but he did not stop a limited convoy system from
being set up after the sinking of the liner Athenia seemed
to show that the Germans had begun a new campaign of
unrestricted submarine warfare. Attempts to cover inde-
pendent ships by patrols launched from aircraft carriers
led to disaster when HMS Courageous was torpedoed and
sunk and Ark Royal just escaped the same fate. The carrier
patrols ceased, but Churchill remained enthusiastic about
“offensive” destroyer operations, which he compared not
very aptly to the cavalry. Like many at the Admiralty at
the time, Churchill overestimated the effectiveness of so-
nar, with which the Admiralty has impressed Churchill
before the war.

In October 1939, U-47 penetrated the inadequate de-
fences of Scapa Flow and sank the battleship Royal Oak,
the most heavily modernised ship in its class. Churchill
was big enough to pay tribute to the skill and daring of the
German captain, but the loss caused a crisis over where
to base the Home Fleet. It was first withdrawn to Loch
Ewe on the northwest coast of Scotland, as it had been
at a similar stage of the First World War. Then flagship
HMS Nelson was mined off the new base, and Churchill
and Pound ordered the Commander in Chief, Admiral
Sir Charles Forbes, to move further south to the Clyde.
Quite rightly Forbes opposed this, as it would prevent
him putting a stopper in the Atlantic entry points. Chur-
chill and Pound went up to Scotland to force Forbes to
comply, but the admiral stood firm and convinced the
First Lord of his view. The defences of Scapa Flow were
improved [see FH 171, “The Churchill Barriers”], and the
fleet duly returned there in March 1940. Forbes had won
the argument, but he may well have made a long-term
enemy; Churchill rarely took to officers who stood up to
him publicly. Forbes was eventually relieved of his com-
mand early.

The Battle of the River Plate

The greatest success of Churchill’s second time at
the Admiralty was the victory over the German
“pocket battleship” Admiral Graf Spee off the Riv-
er Plate by Commodore Henry Harwood’s three cruisers
Ajax, Exeter, and Achilles. Harwood was immediately
promoted to Rear Admiral and became something of a
Churchill favourite. As soon as the action was reported,
Churchill got out of bed and went to the Admiralty’s Op-
erational Intelligence Centre. As Admiral John Godfrey
remembered, “The First Lord clad in his strange night
garment and wondering what would happen next, was
itching to emit a series of instructions to Bobby Harwood
and would have done so but for the presence of Admiral
Pound, who in his quiet way, was able to convince him
that Harwood knew what he was about.”

When the damaged Exeter returned to Britain, the
Admiralty made sure it had a strong escort. Churchill
welcomed her in person at Devonport and made a speech
to the ship’s company in typical terms: “This great action
will long be told in song and story. When you came up
the river this morning, when you entered the harbour and
saw the crowds cheering on the banks, one might almost
think that there were other spectators in the great shades
of the past, carrying us back to the great days of Drake
and Raleigh, to the great sea dogs of olden times. If their
spirits brooded on this scene, you would be able to say to
them, ‘We, your descendants, still make war and have not
forgotten the lessons you taught.’”

Nordic Enterprises

Churchill was already heavily involved in new off-
densive plans. Stopping the flow of Swedish iron
ore remained the target. As early as 19 September
1939, Churchill had proposed to the War Cabinet a
plan to deny Germany maritime access to the Norwegian
port of Narvik, the only conduit through which the ore
could be exported during the winter months.
Again it is hard to fault Churchill’s strategic logic, informed as it was by the reports of the Ministry of Economic Warfare on Germany’s heavy dependence on this raw material. Churchill put it well in December: “No other measure is open to us for many months to come which gives so good a chance of abridging the waste and destruction of the conflict, or of perhaps preventing the vast slaughters which will attend the grapple of the great armies…If Germany can be cut off from all Swedish ore supplies from now onwards till the end of 1940, a blow will have been struck at her war-making capacity equal to a first-class victory in the field or from the air, and without any serious sacrifice of life. It might, indeed, be immediately decisive.”

This was in support of a plan to mine Norwegian coastal waters, a submarine mine laying mission off Lulea (the Swedish side of the railway from the ore fields), and, if the Germans retaliated, occupying Narvik and Bergen. Churchill argued that small nations should not tie the hands of great powers fighting for their rights and freedoms. The Soviet invasion of Finland had opened up other opportunities, and on 20 December Churchill argued for an expedition to aid the Finns and capturing the northern iron ore fields in the process. Two days after that, Churchill was arguing for destroyer operations in Norwegian territorial waters to stop coastal traffic and an advance to occupy the ore fields if the Germans landed in Sweden. By 27 December, Churchill had returned to naval action by destroyers alone. But now, perhaps ironically, the Chiefs of Staff argued for a land attack on the ore fields via Narvik. The First Lord’s was no longer the most aggressive voice in decision-making circles. The Soviet invasion of Finland had opened up other opportunities, and on 20 December Churchill argued for an expedition to aid the Finns and capturing the northern iron ore fields in the process. Two days after that, Churchill was arguing for destroyer operations in Norwegian territorial waters to stop coastal traffic and an advance to occupy the ore fields if the Germans landed in Sweden. By 27 December, Churchill had returned to naval action by destroyers alone. But now, perhaps ironically, the Chiefs of Staff argued for a land attack on the ore fields via Narvik. The First Lord’s was no longer the most aggressive voice in decision-making circles. Most favoured Churchill’s more moderate scheme, but Norway’s reaction to the proposal was very hostile. Churchill argued for proceeding anyway, wanting to make the Scandinavians more scared of the Allies than the Germans!

**Alterning Course**

The next incident to affect Norway was the situation created when the *Altmark*, auxiliary of the *Admiral Graf Spee*, tried to exploit Norwegian neutrality to return to Germany with prisoners taken from the ships sunk by the now-destroyed *Spee*. Churchill played a leading role in what followed by obtaining the approval of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, over the telephone to signal Captain Philip Vian in the destroyer *Cossack* to violate Norwegian neutrality to rescue the prisoners. At one level, this was an example of effective action, but at another it was unwise to bypass Admiral Forbes, under whose command Vian was operating. In the end, there was no conflict of orders, and all ended well with a minor triumph made famous by the cry “The Navy’s here!” as the merchant sailors were liberated.

This incident led Churchill to resume his campaign for a mining operation. This became Operation Wilfred coupled with R4, the deployment of British forces in Norway if Germany reacted. Unfortunately, it also encouraged Hitler to carry out a pre-emptive strike to safeguard his vital supplies. The Germans won the race for Norway. It did not help that Churchill and Pound had ordered the ships carrying the R4 forces to disembark their troops so that the ships could join the Home fleet opposing a suspected breakout in the Atlantic. The Norwegian campaign ended as a dreadful failure for British sea power. As Arthur Marder, a pro-Churchill historian, put it, “there can be no dispute about Churchill’s strong influence on the inept overall strategy of the campaign, including the changes of plan as well as upon the combined operations.”

This was especially so as Churchill had taken over the chair of the Cabinet’s Military Coordination Committee, having manoeuvred the former Admiral Chatfield, the Minister for the Coordination of Defence, out of office. The ultimate irony of this, of course, was that it was Norway that caused the fall of the Chamberlain Government and Churchill’s elevation to Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. Never has failure been crowned with more success.

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**Endnotes**

2. Ibid., p. 107.
5. Ibid., p. 171.
9. Marder, p. 166.
Both in his second stint as First Lord and then as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, Winston Churchill refused to leave the waging of the war at sea to the admirals alone. Rather he sought to impose his imprint on the navy. With Churchillian energy, he suggested strategy and tactics, argued with his admirals in meetings that dragged into the early morning hours, proposed schemes and operations, rained signals on admirals at sea, and allowed no detail no matter how small to escape his attention. At every turn, he encouraged the offensive and did not hesitate to prod the navy’s flag officers. He badgered those he thought lacking in fire, sacked or sidelined those who had incurred his wrath, respected those who had proven ability even if they disagreed with him, and promoted those he admired. Churchill’s relationship with the senior admirals illustrates the long and difficult, but ultimately victorious, struggle in the war at sea.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound
“My trusted naval friend.”¹

Churchill inherited Pound as First Sea Lord upon taking office as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1939, but quickly grew to like and trust the rather dour old admiral who lacked charisma. He thought Pound, although cautious, had the best brain in the navy.²

Pound’s relationship with Churchill has been controversial, with some condemning him for being weak and failing to stand up to the prime minister, while others praise him for his brilliant handling of Churchill. Pound, who “feared neither God, man, nor Winston Churchill,” never directly confronted his superior over an impractical suggestion with blunt opposition.³ Instead, he would patiently divert the Prime Minister from an impractical scheme by having each proposal thoroughly investigated by the Admiralty’s Plans Division. The detailed analysis would prove the wilder ideas quite impossible and the scheme would usually be abandoned, with Churchill on one occasion asking, “Who thought up this damn fool scheme anyway?”⁴

Never contradicting the prime minister in a meeting, Pound also chose to resist Churchill only on vitally important matters and allow him his way on lesser issues. Pound, who always considered Churchill a magnificent leader and felt a great loyalty to him, freely gave his expert opinion and mostly prevailed when the two were in disagreement. Most contentiously, Pound has been accused of allowing Churchill a large operational role in the Norwegian campaign and giving in to the decision, made on political grounds, to send the Prince of Wales and Repulse to Singapore, where they were promptly sunk by the Japanese.

Through the first four difficult years of the war, however, Churchill’s energy, on the whole, was effectively directed by the unshakeable presence of Pound at the Admiralty. The First Sea Lord resigned due to ill-health shortly before his death in October 1943.

Admiral of the Fleet Lord Keyes
“The vivid personality and unconquerable and dauntless soul of Nelson himself.”⁵

A man of action and who was said actually to enjoy war, Keyes was a close friend of Churchill, as they had known each other since before the First World War. In 1918 Keyes masterminded and led the famous raid on Zeebrugge, which Churchill called the “finest feat of arms in the Great War.”⁶

At the start of the Second World War, Keyes characteristically craved to lead forces in action, despite being sixty-seven years old, a member of parliament, and
not having held a command at sea since 1928. He pestered Churchill for an assignment. Not averse to employing older admirals, Churchill eventually used Keyes as a liaison to the King of the Belgians and then in the more important role of Director of Combined Operations with the charge of preparing raids on occupied Europe. Keyes, called one of “Winston’s pets” by a fellow admiral, infused his command with the commando spirit, all the while antagonizing a string of generals, air marshals, and admirals with his charges of timidity. With Keyes’ relations with the British chiefs of staff having become poisonous, Churchill was forced to sack him. He did not go quietly, saying that he had received “a very raw deal” from the prime minister. After being dismissed in an angry exchange with Churchill, the egomaniacal Keyes begged for another appointment, even suggesting he be made First Lord of the Admiralty.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew B. Cunningham
“An officer of the old school and the pre-air age.”

England’s greatest sailor since Nelson had an uneasy relationship with Churchill. Such was his wariness of Cunningham that a reluctant Churchill had to be persuaded to take him as Pound’s replacement as First Sea Lord.

Commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean Fleet at the outset of the war, Cunningham won an outstanding reputation as a brilliant naval commander in the harrowing early years of the war. In October 1943, Cunningham was appointed First Sea Lord despite Churchill’s initial opposition. The prime minister had not wanted him, believing him to be ill-suited for detailed staff work and lacking in technological expertise. While it is possible that Churchill believed other candidates were better qualified, it is likely that he did not want such a strong character as Cunningham, with whom he had clashed in the past, in the position. In the Mediterranean, Cunningham had been offended by Churchill’s prodding messages, which he thought were harmful, as they implied a lack of confidence in the commander-in-chief on the spot.

Cunningham’s relationship as First Sea Lord with Churchill was indeed stormy, and they were often in disagreement, since unlike other officers he was “impervious to Churchill’s spell.” Working for the demanding Churchill prompted “ABC” to complain in exasperation in his diary that the prime minister was a “most infuriating man” who kept poking his “nose” into matters that did not concern him. Despite his own reputation for bullying, Cunningham used patience and some skill in working with Churchill, including coordinating a unified front with the other chiefs of staff.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Bruce Fraser
“An officer of the highest seagoing reputation.”

As Third Sea Lord, Fraser worked closely with Churchill during the first years of the Second World War. He formed an excellent relationship with him even as he had to contend with the long meetings and seemingly endless stream of memoranda and minutes. Unlike other senior officers who were frustrated by what they saw as Churchill’s interference, Fraser developed an affection for the prime minister. Patient and imperturbable with a good humor, Fraser was well-suited for dealing with Churchill. For his part, Churchill recognized Fraser’s many sound qualities and the admiral soon became one of his favorite officers. Fraser, however, did not hesitate to speak his mind, and they had many loud arguments.

In mid-1942 Fraser became second-in-command of the Home Fleet and the following year took command of the same. With Pound rendered unfit by illness, Churchill sought Fraser as his replacement. Fraser refused to accept the post. He gallantly declined the appointment, telling Churchill that Cunningham was the right man by explaining, “I believe I have the confidence of my own fleet. Cunningham has that of the whole navy.”

Three months after refusing the senior naval appointment, Fraser won his reputation as a fighting admiral by sinking the German battleship Scharnhorst in the waters off northern Norway. In mid-1944, Fraser
was appointed commander of the British Pacific Fleet, somewhat against Churchill’s will since he wanted Admiral James Somerville to continue in the post. In the Pacific, Fraser signed the Japanese instrument of surrender as the British representative aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945.

**Admiral of the Fleet Earl Mountbatten**

“He is young, enthusiastic, and triphibious.”[^16]

Mountbatten, a famous great-grandson of Queen Victoria, was self-confident, energetic, handsome, intelligent, and charming, but also vain, and an intriguer with fantastic ambition. He was, in addition, Churchill’s protégé.

Mountbatten’s connection with Churchill began when he was a child, as his father, Prince Louis of Battenberg, had been First Sea Lord under Churchill at the Admiralty. Possessing courage and and eagerness for battle, but with perhaps only limited tactical ability, Mountbatten was always in the thick of the action as the commander of a destroyer flotilla in the first years of the war. His exploits caught the “imagination” of Churchill who admired his “up and at ’em, ever optimistic attitude.”[^17]

In 1941 Churchill appointed the audacious, albeit rather reckless, destroyer commander as the Adviser on Combined Operations. This already considerable promotion was further upgraded a few months later when the Prime Minister re-designated Mountbatten’s appointment to be that of Chief of Combined Operations, with membership on the Chiefs of Staff committee. Uniquely, Churchill also promoted Mountbatten to the acting rank of Vice-Admiral, Lieutenant-General, and Air Marshal to reflect his combined role. The Prime Minister “strongly approved” of Mountbatten’s work at Combined Operations, with the Dieppe disaster only briefly jarring his confidence in the naval officer.[^18]

Despairing of the tired leadership waging the British war against Japan, Churchill in 1943, after having won Roosevelt’s approval, announced the appointment of his protégé as the new Supreme Allied Commander in the Southeast Asia Theatre. With his experience in combined operations along with his “great energy and daring,” the Prime Minister declared Mountbatten uniquely qualified for the theatre command.[^19] Despite sending a new commander to the region, Churchill still considered Burma of secondary importance for the British. Mountbatten, nonetheless, fulfilled Churchill’s
Churchill always strongly supported aggressive commanders and quickly developed a respect for the hard-charging Vian, a “naturally gifted commander” and one of the war’s great fighting admirals.21 Terribly rude, prone to fits of temper, ruthlessly demanding of his subordinates as well as himself, he was at his best in battle and willing to act on his own initiative. At least one of his fellow admirals said Vian was “not quite normal at times.”22

Churchill held Vian in high regard and “made him something of a mascot” and insisted he appear in nearly every major naval operation “regardless of his suitability for it.”23 During the war, Vian fought against the Germans, Italians, and Japanese, with his finest hour coming at the Second Battle of Sirte when he outfought a much more powerful Italian fleet in an action universally acclaimed as brilliant. In 1943, Vian was summoned back to London from the Mediterranean and invited to Chequers, where he was offered the post of Chief of Combined Operations by Churchill in succession to Mountbatten. Vian, who referred to an earlier desk job he held at the Admiralty as “soul-destroying,” declined the offer. Instead, he received command of the Eastern Task Force for the D-Day landing. Six days after D-Day, Vian escorted Churchill on the off-shore portion of his visit to Normandy. Much against his “better judgement,” he was persuaded by the Prime Minister to take their destroyer inshore and bombard the enemy-held coast.24 Vian ended the war commanding the British Pacific Fleet’s aircraft carrier squadron.

Several war-time naval officers and post-war historians have been critical of Churchill’s involvement in the war at sea and have accused him of dominating the navy’s admirals to poor ends. Recent scholarship has concluded, however, that while a “difficult and demanding master,” Churchill was willing to accept the views of the admirals and refrain from overruling them even when he was not in agreement.25 For his part, Churchill was unrepentant about his relationship with the navy. He made no apologies for having relentlessly sought to “pester, nag, and bite” his admirals. ø
In his war memoirs, Winston Churchill wrote of the danger in the Atlantic: “Besides the constant struggle with the U-boats, surface raiders had already cost us over three-quarters of a million tons of shipping. The two enemy battle-cruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau and the cruiser Hipper remained poised at Brest under the protection of their powerful A. A. batteries, and no one could tell when they would again molest our trade routes. By the middle of May [1941] there were signs that the new Battleship Bismarck, possibly accompanied by the new 8-inch-gun cruiser Prinz Eugen, would soon be thrown into the fight.”

Based on naval intelligence, Churchill knew the German battleship was a fast and powerful vessel and the most heavily armored ship afloat. The Bismarck had eight 15-inch guns in four turrets, two fore and two aft. It also had eighty-one smaller guns, mostly anti-aircraft.

The Bismarck also had a special anti-torpedo belt made of nickel-chrome steel, which the Germans believed would ensure that no torpedo in use by the British could penetrate. With some reason, Germans were convinced that the Bismarck was nearly unsinkable.

Design, Construction, and Launching

In 1934, the German Navy’s Construction Office began work on the preliminary and contract design on the Battleships designated “F” (Bismarck) and “G” (Tirpitz). Dr. Hermann Burckhardt designed the ships. On 16 November 1935, five months after Germany signed the Anglo-German Naval Treaty, the Bismarck was officially ordered. The contract for building the ship went to the Blohm & Voss shipyard in Hamburg.

On 1 July 1936, the keel was placed and construction began. On 13 February 1939, Adolf Hitler was at the Blohm & Voss shipyard to preside over the launching of the ship. More than 60,000 people, including government and military officials as well as yard workers, were in attendance.

In his pre-launch speech, Hitler formally named the vessel in honor of Germany’s statesman Otto von Bismarck. Dorothee von Lowenfeld-Bismarck, daughter of von Bismarck’s second son, smashed a champagne bottle on the bow and declared: “On the order of the Führer, I christen you with the name Bismarck.”

The new ship’s captain was Ernst Lindemann. The crew of the Bismarck numbered 103 officers, including the ship’s surgeons and midshipmen and 1,962 petty officers and sailors. Fleet staff, prize crews, and war correspondents raised the number on the Bismarck to more than 2,000.

On 8 August 1940, Churchill wrote to Archibald Sinclair, the Secretary of State for Air, and Cyril Newall, the Chief of Air Staff, to examine the possibility of “heavy attacks” on the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau at Kiel, the Bismarck at Hamburg, and the Tirpitz at Wilhelmshaven, as they were all targets of supreme importance. On 13 October, Churchill wrote to General Ismay for the Combined Chiefs of Staff: “The greatest prize open to Bomber Command is the disabling of Bismarck and Tirpitz.” Churchill’s desire did not occur.

Towards the end of April 1941, the Bismarck was provisioned for three months at sea. Captain Lindemann entered in the War Diary: “Even though my crew, with few exceptions, has had no combat experience, I have the comforting feeling that, with this ship, I will be able to accomplish any mission assigned to me. This feeling is strengthened by the fact that, in combination with the level of training, we have for the first time in years a ship whose fighting qualities are at least a match for any enemy.”

On 1 May, Hitler inspected the Bismarck and Tirpitz. Although quiet during the inspection and briefings, Hitler was aware of the British Fleet’s superiority and concerned that the big ships might be lost, which would also hurt his prestige. Hitler also thought that commerce raiding deviated from the proper mission of warships; however, he reluctantly permitted the operation.

Fearful that Hitler might change his mind, Erich Raeder, Commander in Chief of Kriegsmarine, and Günther Lütjens, Fleet Commander, did not inform him that the Bismarck was scheduled to sail in two weeks. The ship’s departure was not reported until the Bismarck had been at sea for four days.
Heading to the Atlantic

The Royal Navy’s pursuit of the Bismarck began on 21 May 1941 at 0800 when the Admiralty received a coded message from a British agent in Sweden. The previous afternoon, the agent had seen two large German warships steaming north through the strait between Sweden and Denmark.

The ominous report was transmitted to Sir John Tovey, the commander in chief of the Home Fleet aboard his flagship King George V. Aerial reconnaissance identified the German warships as the battleship Bismarck and the Prinz Eugen. It was clear to Admiral Tovey that the Bismarck was headed to the North Atlantic to sink British shipping.

Tovey was correct. The Operation Order for the Bismarck issued by Raeder and the Chief of the Seekriegsleitung, Admiral Schniewind, on 2 April 1941 read: “The primary mission of this operation also is the destruction of the enemy’s shipping; enemy warships will be engaged only when primary mission makes it necessary and it can be done without excessive risk.”

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The Bismarck’s presence was extremely troubling to Tovey, as ten prized convoys were at sea. An eleventh convoy with 20,000 troops for Egypt was ready to sail the next day, with the aircraft carrier Victorious and battle cruiser Repulse as escorts. Tovey was aware that none of the convoys had necessary naval defenses against the Bismarck.

Tovey knew the Bismarck had to be found and destroyed. His Home Fleet at Scapa Flow included two new 35,000-ton battleships, his flagship King George V and her sister ship Prince of Wales. The 42,000-ton Hood, also a battle cruiser, was available. It was the largest vessel in the Navy and its pride. Like all battle cruisers, however, the Hood had forgone armor protection for speed. Upon deliberation, Tovey knew that the only ship that could challenge the Bismarck was the Hood.

Sinking of the Hood

On the night of 21 May, a squadron of the Home Fleet, including the Hood and the Prince of Wales, sailed from Scapa Flow to confront the German ships. The Admiralty also ordered Vice Admiral James Somerville northward from Gibraltar with Force H—Renown, Ark Royal, the cruiser Sheffield, and six destroyers—to protect the convoy that was out to sea with 20,000 troops or to join in the battle. Somerville’s ships left Gibraltar on the 24th, and as Churchill later wrote: “They carried with them, as it turned out, the Bismarck’s fate.”

At 0535 on 24 May, British lookouts saw on the horizon the shapes of two German warships. Soon, the Hood and Prince of Wales confronted the Bismarck and Prinz Eugen. After both sides opened fire, the Hood and Prince of Wales were ordered to turn to port away from the Germans to allow them to use their aft guns, and to fire broadsides with all their large cannon.

American journalist William L. Shirer wrote of what occurred: “As the British ships veered around, a salvo from the Bismarck hit the Hood midships. Observers on both sides saw a scene they had never before looked upon at sea. Between the two funnels of the Hood there
was suddenly a volcanic flame that erupted skyward for a thousand feet. Then in a second or two it burned out, and a dense cloud of smoke settled over the sea.” Of the 1,419 men aboard the Hood, only three men were picked up alive. Vice-Admiral Lancelot Holland, Captain Ralph Kerr, and the rest of the crew went down with the ship.

Upon learning of the Hood Churchill wrote: “At about seven I was awakened to hear formidable news. The Hood, our largest and also our fastest capital ship, had blown up. Although somewhat lightly constructed, she carried eight 15-inch guns, and was one of our most cherished naval possessions. Her loss was a bitter grief, but knowing of all the ships that were converging towards the Bismarck I felt sure we should get her before long, unless she turned north and went home.”

Inside six hours of the loss of the Hood, the Admiralty deployed a number of warships against the Bismarck, which included four battleships, two battle cruisers, two aircraft carriers, three heavy cruisers, ten light cruisers, and twenty-one destroyers.

**Chasing the Bismarck**

The Royal Navy was unaware the Bismarck had been damaged. One of the two shells from the Prince of Wales had pierced the German vessel below the water line and exploded among some of her oil tanks, blowing a hole in the ship’s side. Water poured into the damaged tanks, making the remaining fuel unusable and causing the ship to leave an oil slick in its wake.

With its fuel supply fast dwindling, the Bismarck reduced speed. In addition, the ship’s rudder was jammed, which affected its steering. The mighty German battleship was in dire straits. After confirming that the Bismarck was trailing oil, the Prinz Eugen broke away permanently to refuel from a tanker and undertake action on its own.

In the early morning of 25 May, the British lost contact with the Bismarck. Unknown to them, Fleet Admiral Günter Lütjens onboard the Bismarck decided that the ship would steam southeast to St. Nazaire for repairs. Due to an error in plotting, Tovey believed the German warship would be heading to its home port through the Norwegian Sea, and he sailed northerly with the Home Fleet, searching in vain for his prey.

Meanwhile, Vice Admiral Somerville raced full speed northwest with Force H. At the same time, Captain Dalrymple-Hamilton of the battleship Rodney under the command of Tovey believed that the Bismarck was heading toward France. He decided not to follow orders and remain where he was. Somerville, who was not under Tovey’s direct command, also disregarded orders for the northeast search.

On the afternoon of 25 May, Tovey was radioed the position of the Bismarck. He was shocked to learn that the German battleship was heading southeast to a French port and not sailing north for her home haven. The Admiral’s navigation officer checked his plotting and confirmed the arithmetic mistake. At 1810, Tovey directed the Home Fleet to a new course southeast.

The hunt for the Bismarck, 1941
three Catalinas, American flying boats, were unsuccessful.

Air Marshal Sir Frederick Bowhill, a rare blend of an English officer who had been both in the merchant marine and a pilot in the RAF, had a feeling the Bismarck was headed for Brest or St. Nazaire. The Admiralty agreed and extended the search further north. The entire search area became a “rectangle tilted northeast” about two hundred miles long and a hundred miles wide.

On 26 May, scouting planes from Somerville’s Ark Royal were sent out at dawn. By ten o’clock there was no news from the scouting planes. At 1030, however, a message was received by a dozen British ships from a Catalina: “…One battleship…sighted…position 49 30 north…21 50 west…steering 150 degrees [roughly southeast by east]…speed…20 knots….”13 The Bismarck was again located.

By 26 May, the British fleet was upon the Bismarck. Among the ships were the Ark Royal, Renown, Sheffield, and the destroyer flotilla of Captain Philip Vian.

After receiving the Admiralty’s radio signal that a Catalina had found the Bismarck, Captain Benjamin Martin of the heavy cruiser Dorsetshire, escorting a northbound convoy 300 miles north of the Bismarck, felt he had a good chance of intercepting the warship. Captain Martin decided to intercede.

On a second aerial attempt, fifteen Swordfish biplanes from the Ark Royal, each carrying one 1,600 pound torpedo under its fuselage, attacked the Bismarck; two, possibly three struck the warship. Captain Vian’s destroyers were then surrounding the Bismarck.

The Reckoning

On the 27th, Churchill went to the Admiralty and watched the scene on the charts in the War Room. News was received every few minutes. While the Royal Navy was engaging the Bismarck, Churchill left the Admiralty and went to the House of Commons to report about the battle in Crete and the Bismarck.

“This morning shortly after daylight the Bismarck, virtually at a standstill, far from help, was attacked by the British pursuing battleships,” said Churchill. “I do not know what were the results of the bombardment. It appears, however that the Bismarck was not sunk by gunfire, and she will now be dispatched by torpedo. It is thought that this is now proceeding, and it is also thought that there cannot be any lengthy delay in disposing of this vessel. Great as is our loss in the Hood, the Bismarck must be regarded as the most powerful, as she is the newest, battleship in the world.”

Churchill had just sat down when a slip of paper was handed to him, and he rose again. Asking for the indulgence of the House, he said: “I have received news that the Bismarck is sunk. They seemed content,” wrote Churchill.14

Churchill later wrote about what occurred: “It was the cruiser Dorsetshire that delivered the final blow with torpedoes, and at 1040 the great ship turned over and foundered. With her perished nearly 2,000 Germans and their Fleet Commander, Admiral Lutjens. One hundred and ten survivors, exhausted but sullen, were rescued by us. The work of mercy was interrupted by the appearance of a U-boat and the British ships were compelled to withdraw.”15

For Churchill and the English people, the sinking of the Bismarck was an important triumph against Hitler. At the time, it had an important effect on the nation’s morale. Most importantly, it safeguarded future shipping convoys on the Atlantic, which were vital to the nation’s survival. The Royal Navy’s success in sinking the Bismarck entered the annals of England’s esteemed naval history.

Fred Glueckstein is a regular contributor to Finest Hour and author of Churchill and Colonist II (2014).

Endnotes
7. Ibid., p. 72.
11. Shirer, p. 35.
13. Shirer, p. 82.
15. Ibid.
Within weeks after his resignation as First Lord of the Admiralty in the aftermath of the disastrous Dardanelles campaign in 1915, a despondent Winston Churchill—together with his younger brother Jack and sister-in-law Gwendeline Churchill—rented a cottage at Hoe Farm in Surrey. “I had great anxiety and no means of relieving it,” he recalled in his 1921 essay “Painting as a Pastime.” With Gwendeline’s encouragement, Churchill found relief: in painting. For the rest of his life—at home, on holiday, and even, occasionally, on the battlefield—Churchill’s oils were rarely far from hand. Painting was a joy and a consolation, a source of sustenance and an intellectual challenge.

Among Churchill’s nearly 600 canvases, two of them, created nearly thirty years apart, reveal Churchill’s affection for—indirectly and directly—the Royal Navy. A close examination of these two canvases may reveal something more: nostalgia.
Portrait of Lady Churchill at the Launching of HMS Indomitable, is Churchill’s affectionate portrait of his wife Clementine. Likely created in 1955 (Indomitable was sold for scrap that same year), the painting hangs at Chartwell today. The work is a striking and nostalgic painting of Clementine looking resplendent in a sumptuous hat. Clementine’s joyous face is surrounded by rough-hewn background, giving the canvas an unfinished look. To create the composition, Churchill used a projector to enlarge one of his favorite photographs. The image was projected—in reverse of the original—onto the canvas, allowing Churchill to make a faithful, albeit larger, copy of the photo. The photograph was taken on 26 March 1940, the day Clementine formally christened HMS Indomitable, a modified Illustrious class aircraft carrier. Though he painted this portrait at age eighty—likely after stepping down from his second premiership—Churchill looks back with fondness at the time when he briefly served once again as First Lord of the Admiralty at the outset of the Second World War.

Firth of Forth, created more than thirty years earlier at about the time Churchill published “Painting as a Pastime,” depicts the British fleet at sail in Scotland. The painting, now in the collection of the National Churchill Museum, is unusual: it is the only one of Churchill’s paintings that depicts warships. While individual vessels in the painting have not been identified, the ship in the foreground resembles a British Acasta class destroyer, with its three funnels, the first generally taller and slimmer than the remaining two. Acasta class destroyers were launched between 1912 and 1913, when Churchill led the Admiralty and strengthened and modernized the British fleet. The ships saw extensive action during the First World War. The last of them were scrapped in 1921.

It may be impossible to know with certainty why Churchill chose to recall the Royal Navy when he created these paintings. It is possible, however, to imagine Churchill humming, with brush in hand, “Heart of Oak—all the while remembering with fondness the days when he was the political head of the most storied branch of Britain’s armed services.

In the words of the Royal Navy anthem “Heart of Oak”:

Heart of Oak are our ships,
Jolly Tars are our men,
We always are ready: Steady, boys,
Steady!
We’ll fight and we’ll conquer again and again.

Timothy Riley is Sandra L. and Monroe E. Trout Director and Chief Curator of the National Churchill Museum at Westminster College.
Specialized Churchill bookseller Barry Singer directed a query by Churchill collector Michael Barrington to me regarding the colour of the endpapers on copies of his one-volume edition of *The River War* (Longmans Green, 1902). Mr. Barrington was understandably concerned that the white endpapers were not original, as I had described the binding in my Bibliography as having coated black endpapers [see Cohen A2.2], and their appearance might have reflected the rebinding or other alteration of a copy of the abridged edition.

Let me first remind readers of a few points regarding Churchill’s second work, which chronicled his time as a war correspondent attached to the 21st Lancers, one of the regiments despatched to join Kitchener’s forces in the re-conquest of Sudan. Churchill left London on 27 July 1898 to board a ship at Marseilles bound for Egypt, where he arrived on 2 August, with a *Morning Post* contract to report on the conflict (at £15 per despatch). He filed the first of his fifteen letters to the paper on 8 August (it was published on 31 August) and the fourth on 2 September, describing the famous Cavalry charge at Omdurman (which was published on 23 September). By the time he had filed his sixth letter, he had determined to write a book on the campaign (which he dubbed the “River War”) and which lasted from April 1896 through February 1899.

The first edition of the massive two-volume edition of *The River War* was published in November 1899 at a price of 36s. There were three printings, of 3,009 copies in all. Of these, the final 363 copies were wasted by the publisher on 28 April 1903, by which time the second edition, in one volume, had been published—no need to describe here the contentious aspects of the first edition, including Churchill’s comments about Kitchener, which contributed to the need for a second edition.

There was but a single printing of the one-volume edition, of 1,003 copies, on 30 September 1902, of which 392 were sold or otherwise distributed (they were published during the week of 19 October 1902 and sold for 10s 6d).

What is essential to note is that, in accordance with customary publisher practice, these copies were not all bound on that occasion. In fact, it is likely that only 501 copies, that is, one-half of the print run, were initially bound. In all likelihood, these would all have had the coated black endpapers. Of these, 392 were sold, presented or sent by Longmans London to Longmans New York for sale in the American market; only 109 were retained by the publisher in London for anticipated sales, which were only gradual thereafter. In fact, I have no record of sales after 1 June 1908, at which date 407 copies remained on hand. Of these, 57 sets of sheets had been bound and the remaining 350 remained unbound. I would expect that any copies bound and sold/distributed after the initial binding of 501 copies noted above would have had white endpapers. It would not have been economical to bind the small numbers needed from time to time with the more expensive coated black endpapers.

In other words, **all copies of the 1902 abridged River War are first editions thus** (although, of course, second editions of the *River War* itself, as a work) and **first printing copies**, and of equal merit in that regard. Some, perhaps half of the initial print run (but possibly fewer than that) were likely bound with white endpapers. In other words, such copies are not examples of later rebinds. They would, at worst, represent later sales of first editions thus, not later printings, nor rebinds or repairs of any kind. Mr. Barrington need have no concern about the genuineness and priority of his copies of the one-volume edition with white endpapers.

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*Ronald I. Cohen MBE is author of *A Bibliography of the Writings of Sir Winston Churchill* (2006).*
“Lewis E. Lehrman’s arresting and deeply researched study of the Anglo-American alliance during the Second World War brilliantly establishes how Roosevelt and Churchill … found and relied on the right people …. Rich in historical immediacy, *Churchill, Roosevelt & Company* demonstrates how generals, diplomats, spies, businessmen, economists, and other key figures served the needs of both Prime Minister and President in their unyielding defense of democratic government.”

- Prof. Richard Carwardine, Rhodes Professor of American History at Oxford University

“Lewis E. Lehrman demonstrates an almost uncanny feel for all the senior personalities around Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Second World War; he understands their characters, viewpoints, and motives … coupled with an impressively objective judiciousness …. [the book is] well-researched, well-written, and profoundly thoughtful …”

- Prof. Andrew Roberts, King’s College, London, author of *Masters and Commanders* and *Storm of War*

“Lewis Lehrman’s *Churchill, Roosevelt & Company* offers a detailed look at the special relationship, especially during World War II, when Anglo-American cooperation achieved its most impressive results and faced its most formidable challenges. The book is packed with fascinating detail and illuminates not only the past but the challenges of the present day. The subtitle is *Studies in Character and Statecraft*: Mr. Lehrman makes it clear that, in geopolitics, the two go together.”

- Arthur Herman, Pulitzer Prize nominee for *Gandhi and Churchill* (The Wall Street Journal Featured Review)

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Throughout his long life, Winston was often his own worst enemy. It began at an early age. The summer of 1892 for Winston is best known for his first failure to pass the entrance exams to Sandhurst. Yet on 30 June, the day after he finished the exams, he wrote a characteristically optimistic letter to his father (“I did very well”) about the marks he believed he had achieved in the exams on the last day. In the event, success eluded him. The total points for all eight subjects were 12,000, and the minimum passing score was 6457 or roughly 54%. Winston’s score was 5100 or 42.5%. He fell below a passing mark on six of the eight exams. The only two subjects in which he was above the average were French (1218 of 2000 or 61%) and English Composition (305 of 500 or 61%). Out of 693 candidates, only the top ninety passed the exams. Winston placed 390th.

It is not surprising, therefore, that his father wrote to Winston’s grandmother, the Duchess of Marlborough, in early September that “I don’t think Winston did particularly well in the army examination….His next try is on Nov 24th. If he fails again I shall think about putting him in business…."

All prominent Conservative Party members in Lloyd George’s coalition government strongly opposed bringing Churchill back into the Cabinet in any position. But brought back he was. When given his choice by Lloyd George, Churchill chose the Ministry of Munitions. The Prime Minister’s private secretary (and later, in 1943, his wife) Frances Stevenson offered an explanation to her diary:

He says he wants someone who will cheer him up and help & encourage him & who will not be continually coming to him with a long face and telling him everything is going wrong. At present, he says he has to carry the whole of his colleagues on his back.

At the same time he announced Churchill’s appointment, Lloyd George also appointed Edward Montague as Secretary of State for India. This prompted the Conservative Lord Derby to observe in a letter a different reason for Churchill’s appointment, namely that Lloyd George was simply protecting his flanks against a renewed assault from Asquith, whom he had replaced as Prime Minister: “There is no doubt that the appointment of Winston and Montagu is a very clever move on Lloyd George’s part. He has removed from Asquith his two most powerful lieutenants, and he has provided for himself two first-class platform speakers, and it will be platform speakers we shall require to steady the country, which is at present very much rattled by that distinguished body the House of Commons…."

The conservative Morning Post, in what passed for the “fake news” of its day, falsely accused Churchill in an editorial criticizing his appointment of having “managed more or less personally” the attack on the Dardanelles in 1915 and the defense of Antwerp in 1914 and “whose overwhelming conceit led him to imagine he was a Nelson at sea and a Napoleon on land.” It sneered that Churchill’s appointment “proves that although we have not yet invented an unsinkable ship, we have discovered the unsinkable politician.”

Confounding his political enemies, Churchill accomplished in only four weeks a complete top-to-bottom reorganization of the wildly inefficient Ministry of Munitions. He eliminated fifty semi-autonomous departments, each headed by its own Director-General with authority to purchase materials and organize production methods independently of the other forty-nine departments. He replaced these with a Munitions Council of only eleven members, each responsible for five or six of the previous departments and reporting directly to Churchill. He also created a Council Secretariat to centralize and coordinate between the eleven council members. When a problem arose that only involved two or three members of the council, Churchill set up Council Committees with the
relevant Council Members, officers from the relevant departments, along with businessmen and industrialists. The Committees reported directly to Churchill, who would read and approve their reports, noting at one point, “I think I have hardly altered a word.”

As Churchill wrote to Lloyd George on 9 September, “This is a very heavy department, almost as interesting as the Admiralty, with the enormous advantage that one has neither to fight Admirals or Huns! I am delighted to work with all these clever business people who are helping me to their utmost. It is very pleasant to work with competent people.”

Prior to his appointment as Minister of Munitions, Churchill had publicly opposed the Government’s war policy, especially a new offensive in the West in the fall of 1917. He preferred to wait and prepare for an overwhelming offensive in 1918 after American troops had arrived. He did not change his views after taking up his new post. He wrote to Lloyd George on 22 July repeating his views opposing a new offensive in France that fall: “I deplore with you the necessity of giving way to the military wish for a renewed offensive in the West.” He asked the Prime Minister to “limit the consequences” of any attack that had already been decided upon.

Churchill in fact convinced Lloyd George that it was doubtful Britain had sufficiently overwhelming power to defeat the Germans on the Western Front before the arrival of the Americans in 1918, but Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander in France, had different ideas and persuaded the War Cabinet to approve what became the Third Battle of Ypres, or Passchendaele. In mid-September, Churchill went on an inspection tour of France, where he spent two days talking strategy with Haig and his staff. Haig remained convinced that he could break through the German trenches at Ypres and end the war. He revealed his contempt for Churchill as a military strategist in his diary: “I have no doubt that Winston means to do his utmost to provide the army with all it requires, but at the same time, he can hardly stop meddling in the larger questions of strategy and tactics; for the solution of the latter he has no real training, and his agile mind makes him a danger because he can persuade Lloyd George to carry out the most idiotic policy.”

In the event, it was not Churchill but Haig who was shown to be an idiot. Passchendaele cost the British more than 310,000 casualties, with no breakthrough of the German trenches. Lloyd George wrote in his memoirs that it “was indeed one of the great disasters of the war…. No soldier of any intelligence now defends this senseless campaign.”

75 YEARS AGO
Summer 1942 • Age 67
“The Ogre in His Den”

Summer did not begin well for Churchill. On 21 June, the day after FDR had agreed to Churchill’s plan to invade French North Africa in 1942 rather than a cross-channel invasion of France, he received the news that Tobruk had surrendered with 33,000 men taken prisoner by a German force—Rommel’s Afrika Corps—inferior in numbers to the British. As Churchill later wrote of the fall of Tobruk: “Defeat is one thing, disgrace is another.”

Churchill returned from America on 25 June, and the next two months would rank among the most perilous and eventful for him in the war. In Britain, he faced a Vote of Censure in the House of Commons, which—as it turned out—fizzled, followed by what Roy Jenkins described as “a journey of great personal courage to Egypt and Russia. It was courageous in two respects. First, it involved appreciable hazard and serious discomfort…. The austerities of long flights in large bombers had to be endured, ….Second, and more important, there was the inherent oppressiveness of the substance of Churchill’s missions. In Cairo, he had crucial and possibly damaging decisions of command to make. In Moscow, he had to confront ‘the ogre in his den’ and to bring him a distinctly unwelcome message,” i.e., that there would be no “second front” in Europe in 1942.

Churchill arrived in Cairo on 4 August. Once there, he decided to replace General Auchinleck in his two positions as Commander-in-Chief Middle East and as commander of the Eighth Army. The former position he gave to General Alexander. On General Brooke’s recommendation, Churchill gave the Eighth Army to General Montgomery.

Churchill then flew to Moscow to meet Stalin. To mollify the Soviet leader over no Second Front in Europe in 1942, Churchill assured him—in a conversation that doubtless would have been Exhibit ‘A’ in their war crimes trials had the Nazis won the war—that he thought German civilians and their morale were a legitimate “military target. We sought no mercy and we would show no mercy.” Churchill went on to tell Stalin that “If need be, as the war went on, we hoped to shatter almost every dwelling in every German city,” to which Stalin smiled and said “That would not be bad.”
Books, Arts, & Curiosities

Closing the Ring


Review by Raymond Callahan

The latest volume of the *Churchill War Papers* gives us a day-to-day picture of the prime minister at a crucial moment for him, and for Britain. In September 1943, Britain was still, in terms of forces engaged, the dominant partner in the Anglo-American alliance. Churchill (and Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff) had imposed a Mediterranean focus on alliance strategy, pushing the cross channel assault (which both dreaded) back until 1944. And that strategy had yielded the hoped-for results. Italy had been knocked out of the war; the Mediterranean was again open to traffic, easing the strain (which had reached crisis proportions) on allied shipping resources. The prospect of conquering most of peninsular Italy, bringing southern and eastern Germany, as well as the Reich’s Balkan satellites, within range of allied heavy bombers, beckoned. So did opportunities further east such as seizing Italian islands in the Aegean, seen as a preliminary to rallying Turkey to the allied cause, feeding the insurrections already burgeoning in Greece and Yugoslavia and perhaps causing the defections of Germany’s nervous Balkan allies. It was a heady moment. Seven months later these dreams lay in ruins. The Italian campaign had stagnated in the face of daunting terrain and a determined, well-conducted German defense. Churchill’s attempt to jump start it (Operation Shingle, the Anzio landing)—its mounting the result of an heroic effort by a man who had just come back from death’s door due to pneumonia—had itself stalled, the victim of lackluster American generalship. The attempt to seize Aegean islands, Churchill’s special project in September 1943, had ended in the last significant victory the Wehrmacht won over Britain. Turkey remained stubbornly neutral. The Balkan satellites remained in Germany’s orbit. Above all Britain and its leader, despite still fielding more troops, very clearly were now the junior partners in the Grand Alliance.

Why this happened is clear enough: British mobilization had peaked while America’s was still expanding. Britain was heavily dependent on American production and American finance—and the Americans had a different version of both how to fight the war, and what the postwar world should look like. George C. Marshall, the US Army’s chief of staff, had always wanted to mount a cross-channel attack, aiming to drive straight to Berlin (what the late Russell Weigly labeled “the strategy of US Grant”—come to grips with the main strength of the enemy and pound his army to bits). FDR, whose vision of the future did not include a British Empire, wanted to strengthen his relations with Russia, seeing those relations as crucial to the postwar world order that he envisioned. The standard view is that all this became evident at Tehran, where Stalin’s insistence on Overlord, and FDR’s cultivation of the Russian leader, left Churchill odd man out, while also revealing dramatically the shifting balance in the Anglo-American alliance. This disappointment was an important contribution to the exhaustion and depression that led to the prime minister’s physical collapse shortly afterwards. The documents certainly illuminate this long recognized, intensely dramatic turning point. But they illuminate as well an earlier, and much less closely examined pivotal episode—the Aegean campaign that followed Italy’s collapse. Italy had become master of the Greek Dodecanese islands as a result of its successful assault on the Ottoman Empire in 1911. In the early autumn of 1943, the islands were garrisoned by badly demoralized Italian units. Only on Rhodes (and Crete) were the Germans present in force. Churchill saw an opportunity: he had long hoped to bring Turkey into the
war, thus opening a direct supply line to Russia and forcing further dispersion of force and attrition on the Germans, who had to retain control of the raw materials they drew from the Balkans. During the war it was an article of faith with many American military planners and political figures that Churchill wanted to launch a Balkan campaign in pursuit of British “imperial interests,” although none of the prime minister’s American critics ever quite specified what those interests were. Refuted multiple times, beginning with Churchill himself and the official history of British grand strategy in the 1950s, whatever life is left in this myth ought to be finally extinguished by the documents in this volume. Churchill’s objectives were precisely what he said at the time they were: contributing to the general erosion of German strength prior to the cross-channel assault. If he had a hidden agenda, it was not planting the British flag in the Balkans but a desire to put off as long as possible the assault on Western Europe and to see that, when it finally occurred, it did so in the most favorable circumstances—against a much weakened Wehrmacht. Neither Churchill nor Brooke nor any other British policymaker, military or civilian, ever forgot the dreadful casualties on the Western Front. The Americans—whose First World War combat deaths were but some 53,000—never really understood the power and depth of the British aversion to repeating the Somme experience (Brooke moreover did not think either his army or Marshall’s yet had the combat and command skills needed for a cross-channel assault and the ensuing campaign—an assessment that now seems quite shrewd).

Churchill’s realization that the balance of power in the alliance had shifted decisively came not at Tehran but in the Aegean. Ironically it came in large part as a result of something he had earlier done. When Operation Torch (the invasion of North Africa) was being planned the previous year, the British had accepted the Americans’ preferred command model, a supreme allied commander. To further sweeten his allies, Churchill had agreed to an American holding the position. This became the model for subsequent Mediterranean operations. Moreover as the war moved to the central Mediterranean, Middle East Command was progressively stripped of military assets in its favor. Although Dwight Eisenhower’s staff (and most of his troops) were British, the deciding vote on the use of those forces lay now with a Marshall protégé, backed by the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington, where American views increasingly carried the day. As one follows the story in the documents, both Churchill’s trademark tenacity and determination and his increasing frustration at the denial of resources for the Aegean are on abundant display. (Churchill complicated his quest for troops to assault the key island of Rhodes by refusing to consider the veteran, well-commanded, but equipment poor 10th Indian Infantry Division, available in the Middle East, for an assault role—follow up and garrison duties were all that, in his view, the Indian Army was good for.) The moment when the prime minister had to face the fact that he was no longer an equal partner came over the fate of Leros, Cos, and Rhodes. The shock this administered and the scar it left explain the seemingly disproportionate amount of space the Aegean campaign later received in his memoirs.

Reading through this huge collection also underlines once again the remarkable efficiency of the quite small “handling machine” headed by Hastings “Pug” Ismay that serviced and supported the Minister of Defence. What was lacking in 1914–15, a deficiency that contributed strongly to the Dardanelles-Gallipoli debacle, was staff support that saw to the orderly transaction of business following up on Churchill’s numerous initiatives, seeing that those ideas were carefully studied and evaluated, and that there was coordinated department action on those that survived this vetting process. This was what he had to hand the second time around. When considering Winston Churchill’s success in 1940–45, that now almost forgotten trio—Ismay along with Leslie Hollis and Ian Jacob—who ran Churchill’s Defence Office, often working ninety-hour weeks, deserve remembrance as well.

Finally, sprinkled throughout the volume, as if to relieve the intensity of the political and military episodes, are some curiosities. Before the Quadrant Conference at Quebec in September 1943, Churchill had been captivated by Brigadier Orde Wingate’s controversial
ideas for reconquering Burma (an American more than a British priority, as it would restore an overland supply line to China). The result was that Wingate’s unproven (and, as it turned out, largely unworkable) concept became central to Anglo-American plans for the 1943–44 campaign in Burma. Now a Churchill protégé, Wingate returned to India after Quadrant to train his “Special Force” and shape his plans. There, characteristically impulsive (and typically lacking in judgment), he quenched his thirst one day by drinking the water in a flower vase. While this might have been mere eccentricity in the US or the UK, it was suicidal in India and Wingate was soon in hospital with a case of typhoid. The volume includes letters from Wingate’s pregnant wife to Clementine and Winston, begging for their help in seeing that her husband took enough leave to recover properly. (Wingate didn’t—some things were beyond even prime ministerial power.)

Browsing one’s way through this vast collection (weighty in every sense of the word), provides a very granular sense of what it was like to manage Britain’s enormously complicated war—and what a unique individual it took to do so. ❧

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A Matter of Pride

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Review by John Campbell

It has become quite a trend for senior British politicians in their retirement to turn to writing history. Following the example of Roy Jenkins, Cabinet veterans Douglas Hurd, William Hague, Roy Hattersley, and others have produced books of some distinction. Some years ago David Owen—Foreign Secretary for two years in the 1970s, but a neurologist before entering politics—brought his medical training to bear in an interesting and original book entitled In Sickness and in Power examining the effect of ill health, usually covered up, on heads of government over the past hundred years, ranging from Churchill and Roosevelt through Anthony Eden and John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush and Tony Blair. In the last two cases he diagnosed, in relation to the Iraq war, a condition he called “Hubris Syndrome,” which he has been trying to popularise ever since. His latest book, disguised as history, is in reality a renewal of his indictment of Blair by means of a clumsily-constructed revisiting of the discussion of possible peace terms in Churchill’s War Cabinet in May 1940.

The ostensible starting-point of the book is that Churchill, in writing his history of the war, glossed over these discussions by asserting that “the supreme question of whether we should fight on alone never found a place on the War Cabinet agenda.” Though literally true, this, as has long been recognised, seriously misleading, since the six-man War Cabinet did in fact, over nine meetings in three days between 26 and 28 May, wrestle with the question of how to respond to the proposal of Paul Reynaud, the French Prime Minister, to ask Mussolini to broker some sort of peace settlement before France collapsed, leaving Hitler free to launch the invasion of Britain. Churchill was determined not to be dragged down any such slippery slope but to fight on alone; but his position as a new Prime Minister widely mistrusted by much of his own Conservative party was precarious. Lord Halifax, as Foreign Secretary, was still anxious to explore every possible opening to end the war, and Neville Chamberlain, Churchill’s predecessor who still commanded strong support, was inclined the same way. The balance was swung by the two Labour members, Clement Attlee

and his little-remembered deputy, Arthur Greenwood, who played a crucial role, and the Liberal leader, Archibald Sinclair—an old friend whom Churchill shrewdly added to the War Cabinet in the confidence that he would support him. But the outcome was not pre-ordained. Until the “miracle” of Dunkirk managed to bring back most of the British army from France, the military outlook was dire, and the air superiority needed to prevent a German invasion doubtful. Yet Churchill skilfully prised Chamberlain away from Halifax and with
the support of Attlee, Greenwood, and Sinclair carried the day to the extent that he could later pretend that it had never been in question: “We were much too busy to waste time on such unreal, academic issues.”

There is nothing new in this. Owen’s re-telling leans heavily on Roy Jenkins’s 2001 biography of Churchill. Owen’s point in re-hashing it is to assert that Britain’s “Finest Hour,” in Churchill’s phrase, was also the Cabinet’s finest hour and a vindication of coalition government, properly conducted. At the heart of his book Owen reprints (in the original typescript for added authenticity) the minutes of the nine tense War Cabinet meetings which record the savy of arguments alongside some of the diplomatic memoranda and military reports on which the ministers had to base their decision. The cautious bureaucratic language of the official documents—which includes the chilling assessment that “Germany has ample forces to invade and occupy this country. Should the enemy succeed in establishing a force, with its vehicles firmly ashore, the Army in the United Kingdom, which is very short of equipment, has not got the offensive power to drive it out”—does vividly convey the desperate situation they faced. Churchill’s heroic defiance shines through, but so too does his care to bring his colleagues with him.

Then in a final chapter, Owen reveals his real purpose, which is to contrast Churchill’s scrupulous following of correct constitutional procedure, even at this moment of mortal national danger, with Anthony Eden’s drug-distorted handling of the Suez crisis, Margaret Thatcher’s increasing neglect of Cabinet and Parliament, and above all Blair’s reckless by-passing of Cabinet and abuse of intelligence to commit the country to war in Iraq—all examples of Owen’s “Hubris Syndrome.” “No British Prime Minister in wartime,” he writes, “not Asquith, Lloyd George, Churchill or even Eden...made strategic decisions as Blair did over Iraq, personally and without systematically involving senior Cabinet colleagues.” The wilful destruction of Cabinet government was “a hubristic act of vandalism for which, as Prime Minister, Blair alone bears responsibility,” and the war “a saga of hubristic incompetence,” which should constitute an impeachable offence. It is time, Owen concludes hopefully, “to reconsider Presidential Prime Ministerships and revert under Theresa May to a Cabinet Office structure which for a century served us well.” Thus the example of May 1940 is called in aid to point a lesson for today. 

John Campbell’s books include major biographies of F. E. Smith, Aneurin Bevan, Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher, and Roy Jenkins.

In the Company of Giants


Review by Manfred Weidhorn

The roles in the Second World War of the leaders of the two English-speaking nations, Churchill and Roosevelt, have inevitably been much studied. But even proponents of the Great Man theory of history must acknowledge that the successful outcome of the war was made possible by a cast of supporting players—advisers, emissaries, military leaders, industrialists, as well as experts in numerous fields, not to speak of the many soldiers. These secondary characters make brief appearances in the histories of the war and the biographies of the leaders. It is the goal of Lewis E. Lehrman’s book to bring them into the foreground and provide character sketches of them. It is good to have the more important of these men presented in detail, including their physical infirmities, as these affected their meetings and deliberations.

Having read widely, Lehrman often quotes various sources at key junctures. This book therefore provides a helpful digest of the scholarly literature in this field. It usually does not quote from primary sources—diaries, memoranda, letters, interviews—and therefore has no startling new information. Nor does it aim to do so; Lehrman confines himself to offering a compendium of received wisdom about the personages discussed.

The author begins with a comparison and contrast of the president and the prime minister, a road that by now has been much traveled. Then, in more or less chronological order, come the secondary characters who have their day in the sun: brief portraits of Joseph Kennedy, Harry Hopkins, Lord Beaverbrook, Anthony Eden, Averell Harriman, Edward Stettinius, Harry Dexter White, and John Maynard Keynes are interwoven with discussions of major events like the attack on Pearl Harbor or the gradual waning of Churchill’s influence on Roosevelt. The book concludes with the vexing problem of Communist infiltration of some departments in the Roosevelt administration (though the conse-
sequences listed seem to be minor), the aborted Morgenthau Plan, and of course the ending of the war, a conclusion which Churchill aptly labeled “Triumph and Tragedy.”

The two major figures are seen as titanic, despite a host of shortcomings. Roosevelt was cunning, devious, evasive, vain, and eager to be liked—as successful politicians are apt to be. Some of his other weaknesses may be arguable: keeping an eye out for what America can gain from Britain’s plight even while doing his best to help out; moving only as fast as public opinion would allow him, even while trying to prepare the nation for its rendezvous with a wartime destiny; sharing in the American distrust of the British obsession with retaining the Empire, despite the vast changes the war would bring about; becoming, halfway through the war, more concerned—for good reasons—about catering to Stalin’s needs than to Churchill’s; oblivious of the Soviet spies; not overly concerned with economics. Of course it did not help that FDR, like Churchill and Hopkins, was a physical wreck during these testing years.

Churchill had his own sorry tale to tell, one about going from being the savior of Western Civilization to being a peddler with hat in hand. He was the living embodiment of Machiavelli’s principle that if a weak power seeks help from a strong power, it will soon find itself eclipsed. As John Charmley and others have pointed out, Churchill needed America and Russia on his side in order to survive, but the price tag for survival was a Britain, shorn of empire, becoming just another European nation.

One of Lehrman’s conclusions is “That the Anglo-American alliance came together with the massive Russian army is itself a partial explanation of the total defeat of Hitler” (277). “Partial,” indeed. Much credit must also be given to the man most responsible for making all this possible: Corporal Hitler. The German leader picked a fight with Russia while Britain was still alive and then improved on that by picking a fight with the US while both Russia and Britain were still alive. He thus ended up, literally and figuratively, fighting a three front war.

This was self-destructiveness born of hubris. Hitler was under no compulsion to declare war on the US after Pearl Harbor. By so doing, he relieved Roosevelt of a dilemma. It could well be that the course of the war was severely altered by Hitler’s ultimate gamble, without which there would have been no massive Anglo-American presence on the continent. That makes Hitler as responsible for the outcome as Zhukov and Eisenhower. As Stalin put it, “Hitler does not know where to stop” (272). 

Manfred Weidhorn is Emeritus Guterman Professor of English at Yeshiva University and author of four books about Churchill.

How Churchill Saved Civilization is John Harte’s first history book after a career that began as an underage RAF volunteer during the Second World War and later included stints as a journalist and playwright in the UK and South Africa and work in the advertising industry. His “Author’s Preface” sets a lofty goal explaining that the book “is intended to resolve the lingering mysteries about the circumstances that caused the Second World War and what transpired.” Harte, who now lives in Ottawa, tees up a wide range of questions such as, “How did it happen?”; “Why were the Allies unprepared?”; “What were the Nazis really up to?” and what he calls “the inevitable Jewish question.” He boldly announces, “This book was designed to answer all of them.”

The effort of any first-time author should be respected, but the result in this case is mostly superficial, and the book quickly dissolves into a meandering, unfocused, and fairly prosaic account of the international history of the 1930s and 40s with an emphasis on the military campaigns of the Second World War. The title is misleading since, while Churchill appears periodically in many of the book’s twenty-eight chapters, he by no means fills the narrative. The author flits through so many subjects that the book ends up, like

Chronological Chaos


Review by Lee Pollock
Churchill’s pudding, having “no theme” and failing to live up to its ambitious title.

The author’s writing can be loosely casual and awkwardly conversational. For example, speaking of the Allied invasion of Sicily, Harte notes: “It did not turn out to be the walkover that Churchill had expected.” In other cases, references sound like they are from another language, such as “historian Professor Bell” and “author Herman.”

More importantly, as Churchill noted, facts are stubborn things, and How Churchill Saved Civilization is marred by elementary, sloppy errors, which could have easily been prevented. For example, Harte describes Lord Randolph Churchill as “a former First Lord of the Admiralty in Asquith’s Liberal government.” In another chapter Harte records the demise of Benito Mussolini in April 1945 “four months after Ciano was murdered”—although the death of the dictator’s son-in-law had actually occurred in January the previous year.

Worse chronological errors follow. In the chapter on D-Day we are told, “Roosevelt was motivated… by national and self-interest, since 1945 [sic] was the year for a Presidential election.” The book refers to “the Indian mutiny of 1857–58, when Churchill was seventeen” (Churchill was born in 1874), and “civilians in Amritsar… on April 13, 1919 when Britain was at war with Germany”—five months after the Armistice!

Harte’s inability to focus his narrative is evident in his penultimate chapter, in which he includes successive, unconnected snippets on the Allied crossing of the Rhine, the discovery of Nazi concentration camps, the Yalta Conference, the dropping of the atomic bomb, and the British election of July 1945, followed by two pages on the dissolution of the British Empire and Churchill’s 1965 funeral. The chapter ends with Harte’s tip of the hat to the well-known “Rule Britannia” singalong at London’s summertime Proms concerts at Royal Albert Hall, where he imagines—perhaps correctly—that “Winston Churchill… would have loved heartily to join in the chorus.”

The book’s final chapter “Collective Guilt” is particularly eclectic, encompassing the author’s musings on “Then and Now,” including observations on Victorian and Edwardian attitudes to “sex, money, politics and religion,” followed by a lengthy review and refutation of common anti-Churchill accusations (racism, the use of poison gas, the Bengal famine, trade unions, etc.). The latter includes the entirely erroneous assertion that “Churchill had no time for trade unions.” Several more disjointed pages follow on “The Matter of Empire” and “The War Crimes Trials.”

The book’s Acknowledgments do not include the expected list of people who assisted the author’s research or read the manuscript. It seems that Harte writes pretty much in isolation, unfortunate-ly so, since his work would have greatly benefited from input from other Churchillians. The book also includes sixteen pages of fairly ordinary and not especially clear photographs, some apparently pulled from online sources, and a number of detailed maps too small to be readable.

Harte has another book coming out this year, Churchill the Young Warrior: How He Helped Win the First World War. “Young”? Churchill was thirty-nine when the war began, and we must hope that Harte will have learned the date of the Armistice before publication.

Lee Pollock is Trustee and Adviser to the Board of the International Churchill Society and its former Executive Director.

**Man of Many Faces**


*Review by Peter Murray*

Even in the twenty-first century, Winston Churchill remains a dominant figure in the political realm, a benchmark against which any budding figure of the Conservative Party must first measure up, before hurtling into the fray that is the House of Commons. But Churchill also had a sensitive side to his character. He was a keen artist, painting landscapes invested with light and colour, and forming close friendships with other artists, including Walter Sickert and Oscar Nemon. Politics, painting, and sculpture often intersected in Churchill’s life. He took lessons from the Chicago-born artist Hazel
Lavery, and had his portrait painted by her husband, the hugely successful Irish artist John Lavery. Painted in 1915, Lavery’s portrait of Churchill (Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin) is one of the artist’s best works. Bleak and uncompromising, it shows a young man, full of ambition but weighed down by the responsibilities he faced as First Lord of the Admiralty—a position from which he resigned in May of that year, as a result of the disastrous Dardanelles campaign.

Lavery’s portrait is one of the first illustrations in a handsome book by Jonathan Black, *Winston Churchill in British Art, 1900 to the Present Day*, which documents the many representations of the British leader created both during and after his lifetime. Friendship with Hazel and John Lavery remained important to Churchill throughout the 1920’s; they played a key role in providing a communications link between the British and Irish sides during the negotiations that led to the founding of the Irish Free State—so much so that a portrait of Hazel by her husband John adorned Irish banknotes for much of the twentieth century. The 1915 Churchill portrait was followed a year later by one painted by another successful Irish artist in London, William Orpen, and commissioned by Lord Rothermere.

Churchill's lively cousin, Clare Sheridan, sculpted busts of him on two occasions, in the early 1920’s, and later in 1944. Raised in Inishannon, Co. Cork, Sheridan pursued a vivid and independent life, studying art in London before travelling to Moscow in 1920, where she made portraits of the Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin and Trotsky, while taking the latter as a lover. Returning to England, Sheridan found herself out of favour with cousin Churchill and under surveillance as a possible spy, so she took herself to New York, where her Russian portraits created a sensation. She became a journalist, travelling widely and returning occasionally to England and Ireland, where she interviewed Michael Collins. Late in life, she compared their respective lives and achievements, Churchill remarking, somewhat mournfully that while Sheridan still had her art, he had lost an Empire.

Among the other portraitists documented by Black are Ambrose McEvoy and William Nicholson, photographer Cecil Beaton, and sculptors Oscar Nemon and Ivor Roberts-Jones. Artists creating bronze memorials to Churchill had an advantage in that there was something already deeply sculptural—almost Rodinesque—about his stance and determined expression. Nemon’s bronze portrait of Churchill seated, now in the Guildhall, London, was unveiled in 1959, while a later work by the same artist, *Married Love: Winston and Clementine Churchill*, was unveiled in 1990 by the Queen Mother in the garden of Chartwell, country retreat of the Churchill family.

Based at Dorwich House Museum in London, and a fellow in art history at Kingston University, Jonathan Black has done an admirable job researching and writing this book. It carries on from his earlier research, funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, which involved documenting First World War memorials. He went on to publish a book on the work of Ivor Roberts-Jones, who, from the 1970’s onwards, had something of a monopoly on creating memorials to wartime leaders in Whitehall. Roberts-Jones’s portrayal of Churchill was deservedly popular when unveiled in Parliament Square in 1971 and garnered further attention when given a punk grass Mohican hair-do by anti-capitalist protestors in 2000. It also featured in Danny Boyle’s documentary film shown at the opening of the 2012 Olympic Games.

Head of sculpture at Goldsmith’s College of Art until 1978, Roberts-Jones deserves a medal for maintaining his post in the face of the onslaught of the Conceptual art movement, as much as he did for his wartime service during the Burma campaign. He was awarded the 1971 Churchill commission in the face of stiff competition from
Oscar Nemon. Black documents all this in detail with copious footnotes and a good index. From cartoonists to society portraitists, from émigré sculptors to Royal Academicians, artists over the years flocked to portray the heavy-jowled politician with a penetrating gaze, who helped to save the world from fascist dictatorship. This handsome book is a fitting tribute to a great leader.

Peter Murray is an art historian, writer, and curator. He lives in West Cork, Ireland.

Dirty Tricks


ISBN 978–1250119025

Review by Leon J. Waszak

At the start of his book, Giles Milton, a renown British journalist and author, appropriately quotes from the famous Second World War film *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*: “Clive, my dear fellow, this is not a gentleman’s war. This is a life-and-death struggle. You are fighting for your very existence against the most devilish idea ever created by a human brain—Nazi. And if you lose there won’t be a return match next year, perhaps not even for a hundred years!”

Morality aside, fighting a war to a successful conclusion against a determined enemy such as Nazi Germany, was never going to be anything but a difficult and dirty business. Sometimes it required extraordinary means to achieve the ends desired, but one always remained cognizant of the enemy’s capacity to do worse. In the final analysis, the parameters of the conflict, in terms of morality, had already been breached by Hitler’s legions, as they cut a path of destruction and genocide through Europe. Winston Churchill recognized that war’s tactics involved more than moving a few division markers across the maps within the Cabinet War Rooms. He understood that to bring Hitler to heel he needed to use whatever offbeat methods and tactics could be invented (or dreamed up) to achieve this end; hence the so-called “Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare.”

The subject has been examined before, most notably in 1967 by E. H. Cookridge in *Set Europe Ablaze*, but Milton is helped by the release of the remaining files of the SOE (Special Operations Executive) during the late 1990s. Contained within the pages of this new book are often forgotten (or previously suppressed as top secret) exploits of professional spies, secret agents, and saboteurs mixed in with eccentrics and gifted amateurs, who made war by engaging in outside-the-box thinking. Milton’s engaging style also makes his version more accessible to the general reader than academic works on the subject, but he has also done his homework, having researched in many archives.

We learn from Milton that Churchill actually hand-picked many of the “mavericks” who engaged in special operations behind enemy lines, using all the tricks of the trade (and inventing some new ones along the way), with all the ruthlessness and dirty tactics that the more squeamish would abhor. Yet such tactics and methods are credited with shortening the war. Churchill admired all sorts of innovation and was a practitioner himself (the idea of the battle tank during the First World War being just one of many such examples).

In the Second World War, Churchill embraced some unlikely characters, including William Fairborn and Cecil Clarke. Fairborn was an overweight, retired citizen hired on to train guerrillas because he was considered the foremost expert on “silent killing.” Clarke (who was known for futurist design) developed the “dirty bomb” used in the assassination of the dreaded Reinhard Heydrich. And, it wasn’t just a man’s war, as one reads about the many talented women who contributed to the cause. One good example was a woman in her twenties, Joan Bright, who turned down a job as governess to Rudolph Hess’s children to run the “Ministry’s” Caxton Street office, where she became the lynchpin in some guerrilla war activities.

The estate of film legend Vivien Leigh (below left) will go under the hammer this summer at Sotheby’s in London. The auction brings to light a little known but exceptionally fine painting by Winston Churchill (below right), which he presented as a gift to his favorite actress.

Depicting roses from the garden at Chartwell displayed in a glass vase, the still life may have been done in the 1930s and given to Leigh in the late 40s or early 50s. The actress treasured it so much that she hung it on the wall opposite her bed. In her own words: “Whenever I feel particularly low or depressed I look at those three rosebuds. The thought and the friendship in the painting is such a great encouragement to me…and I have the determination to go on.”

Leigh’s friendship with Churchill ran deeper than many people knew, as attested to by a 1957 letter in which Churchill secretly promised to donate money to the St James’ Theatre, which the actress was trying to save at the time. And it seems Churchill himself inspired Leigh to take up painting, after he gave her an inscribed copy of his book *Painting as a Pastime*. Both the letter and book are included in the sale.

Churchill enjoyed seeing Leigh performing in Shakespeare live on stage and never tired of watching her again and again in *That Hamilton Woman*, one of his favorite films. Leigh sent Churchill flowers on his ninetieth birthday and gathered with Noel Coward at the Savoy to watch Churchill’s funeral on television two months later in January 1965. Following Leigh’s own death two years later, the painting passed to her daughter, who also kept it in her bedroom until passing away in 2015.

**Roses for Vivien**

*Painting as a Pastime*
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The International Churchill Society is pleased to announce the 34th International Churchill Conference, “Churchill as International Statesman.” The Conference will be held at the historic Essex House hotel in New York City on October 10–12, 2017. This will be the first-ever International Churchill Conference held in New York, the city that Churchill first visited in 1895 and where he suffered his 1931 “misadventure”—being run over by a car on 5th Avenue. The history of the world hung in the balance just blocks from where we shall meet this autumn.

Lord Dobbs, author of the original House of Cards trilogy that inspired a BBC miniseries and the award-winning Netflix adaptation, will keynote the gala black-tie dinner on October 11.

First-time conference speakers will include Lord Owen, former British foreign secretary and author of Cabinet’s Finest Hour: The Hidden Agenda of May 1940; Lord Bew, author of Churchill and Ireland; and Lewis Lehrman, co-founder of the Gilder-Lehrman Institute for American history and author of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Company. Return favorites will include Andrew Roberts, and David Lough on “Churchill and the Art of the Deal.”

One of the conference’s many highlights will be an interview by Celia Sandys, Churchill’s granddaughter, with Lady Williams (formerly Jane Portal), personal secretary to Churchill during his second premiership.

Registration is free for high school and college students; however, student tickets are not available online. Please contact us via email at info@winstonchurchill.org for more information. Include your school and expected date of graduation.

To book your room at the Essex House, go online or call +1 (212) 247-0300 and quote “The 34th International Churchill Conference, October 10–12.”

If you have any questions or need assistance booking your conference tickets online, please call our office at +1 (202) 994-4744.