

Franziska Augstein:
Winston Churchill. A Biography

*Dear reader,
please find below my translation of the prologue and the epilogue. Please bear in mind that I
am not a native English speaker.
Kind regards. Franziska Augstein*

PREFACE

Winston Churchill was grand. He was grand in his self-contradictions. He was grand in his volatility, his impatience and his opportunism. He was grand in pursuing his personal advantage. He was an accomplished cavalry officer, and a courageous one at that. In this spirit he rode on the back of his political party that was to carry him to high positions and popularity, changing from the Conservative saddle to the Liberals' and back. "I thought he was a young man of promise", the Conservative Arthur Balfour remarked, "but it appears he is a young man of promises."¹ And yet, it was this unprincipled careerist, this uniquely improbable candidate who, as Prime Minister during World War II, became revered and renowned for personifying the virtues necessary for winning the war: perseverance, imperturbability, single mindedness, resolve, in short: trustworthiness.

High office and honours counted a lot for Churchill, they procured him influence and an income. He always lived above his means. Ever adverse to the concept of thrift when it came to his personal expenses, he became one of the most productive and best remunerated journalists and book authors of his times. He was proud of it, boasting in front of loathed communists, including Stalin, that he was anything but a capitalist exploiter, for he would earn his daily bread with his own labour.

Providing for his income on his own was a matter of necessity. Even though hailing from a British high aristocracy, his father did not bequeath him much in terms of money. Randolph Churchill was the second son of the 7th Duke of Marlborough. According to inheritance laws he possessed neither title nor a Great House nor land. Winston Churchill's ancestral inheritance was more or less confined to unlimited pride. When at boarding school he would be beaten until his blood "flowed freely", he persisted thanks to being ever conscious of his forefather John Churchill (1650 - 1722), whose military services for the crown were rewarded with the title 1st Duke of Marlborough, hundreds of acres and Blenheim Palace for a home. Filled to the brim with self-esteem, Churchill quite successfully pursued a career on the battlefield as well as in journalism. Looking back to his youth he wrote that by the age of twenty-five he "had written as many books as Moses", i.e. five, and that he had "very nearly been keeping up that pace" ever since.²

¹ Bonham Carter, Churchill ...

² Reynolds ...

Churchill's remarkable amour propre was on a par with his bad habits: his irascibility, his rudeness, the pleasure he took in listening preferably to himself, and his unswerving conviction to know best. These peculiar traits of character stuck with him throughout his more than sixty years as member of parliament, from 1901 to 1964 - given to eccentricity and oratory, usually rhetorically overwhelming his audience as much as himself.

He was a never tiring activist and a practitioner of sorts, laying his hands on anything that might be steered or fired. He relished cigars and alcohol, with the exception of cocktails. Philandering, though, did not count among his pastimes. United in marriage with Clementine Hozier in 1908, he was a devoted husband throughout his life. The fact that he fathered several children did not come in the way of his deriving utmost satisfaction from stints to various battlefields, during colonial wars of the late 19th century, in the Great War as well as in the Second World War. In 1915, when serving as first Lord of the Admiralty, he confided to a female friend: "I think a curse should rest on me – because I love this war. I know it's smashing & shattering the lives of thousands every moment - & yet – I can't help it – I enjoy every second of it."³ Churchill was aware of the perversity of some such feeling. And yet, whatever his assignment during wartime, he felt elated beyond belief: War was his calling.

As a young man he would attack the enemy on horseback. Later, he imposed his tactical stratagems on fellow cabinet members, on generals and admirals. He for one considered himself an excellent strategist, not for nothing had little Winston deployed hordes of tin soldiers to reenact the battles of the 1st Duke of Marlborough. A man of politics for most of his life, in his wishful dreaming he never stopped being the shining general, leader of valiant combat troops. In real life, and to his enduring disappointment, in the field he never was entrusted with more than the command over a battalion. Looking down on the "fruit salad" on his chest, he sorrowfully contemplated what was missing: the Victoria Cross, awarded for bravery in battle.

Not only did he consider himself an outstanding strategist, in his opinion he was also the only one to have a grasp of the full picture. At times, and in view of matters global, that was not altogether groundless. However, for him, the big picture tended to also comprise nooks and crannies. Especially during World War II he busied himself with minute details, befitting a homespun mind rather than a master and commander and Prime Minister of His Majesty's Government. There being virtually nothing not in need of his attention, he meddled with organizational tasks that could not possibly be decided upon in London. When any of his pet strategies ended in disaster, he would more often than not hold others responsible rather than blame himself. It would be wrong, though, to label him an irresponsible adventurer: Insofar as he believed the goddess of fortune to be on his side, this was because she had chosen him for his abilities.

Never did he enjoy much popularity with his fellow MPs. But thanks to his smashing rhetoric it was difficult for prime ministers as well as chief whips to simply ignore his ambitions. When Churchill set out to demolish someone else's line of argument, he could come up with quips that made the entire House roar with laughter - however succinctly his adversary may advocate his case, he had lost the day. This element of Churchill's rhetorical talent also

³ Bonham Carter, Champion...

helped the Prime Minister to sustain morale during the fight against Nazi Germany. His broadcast polemics against “that man” Hitler made the British nation laugh.

Among his entourage Churchill was known for his furious outbursts. When things were not going according to his wishes he would pour scorn on whoever happened to be in earshot. Neville Chamberlain, Churchill's predecessor in 10 Downing St, once remarked: “Winston is a very interesting but d...d uncomfortable bedfellow. You never get a moment's rest and you never know at what point he'll break out. [...] in the consideration of affairs his decisions are never founded on exact knowledge, nor on careful prolonged considerations of the pros and cons. He seeks instinctively for the large and preferably the novel idea such as is capable of representation by the broadest brush.”⁴ Harold Macmillan, he was later to become Prime Minister, opined: “He is really a remarkable man. Although he can be so tiresome and pig-headed, there is no one like him. His devotion to work and duty is quite extraordinary.”⁵ Perhaps the most astute characterization goes back to Herbert Asquith (Prime Minister from 1908 to 1916): “Winston thinks with his mouth”⁶, meaning that Churchill fashioned his politics according to what spontaneously came to his mind while he was talking.

When Churchill was chosen as PM in 1940, Britain was in existential dire straits. After the capitulation of France the Commonwealth stood alone against Nazi Germany. Stalin and Hitler had concluded a pact of mutual assistance; the United States of America did not want to be drawn into the war; Britain was insufficiently armed. The invasion of the British Isles seemed only a matter of time. Prospects were altogether bleak. Though, for exactly all these circumstances Churchill felt that finally he faced the challenge he was made for. To him it seemed that his entire life had been but the preparation for this moment when he assumed the task to steer Britain victoriously through what was to come. On the verge of succumbing to despair, more than one member of cabinet toyed with the idea of seeking an understanding with Hitler so that the Führer spare their homeland. Yet Churchill would have none of this. General morale was down - the Prime Minister would embolden the faint hearted. Fear was spreading - Churchill would muster the English language to expel it.

While he initially had admired Adolf Hitler for his “leadership”, Churchill now became the German dictator's most eloquent opponent. Gradually, as the war went on, the PM came to embody British defiance. With him - at least in public - there was no room for doubt. Spurning elaborately detailed war aims, he declared that he was intent on one thing and one thing only: victory. Had it not been for him, Britain might have fallen prey to Nazi Germany's appetite for conquests. Without him, that is for sure, the Second World War would have taken a different course.

In 1953 he was awarded the Nobel Prize of literature. From the several dozen books he authored, seven were singled out for special mention, among them his five-volume history of the Great War “The World Crisis”, his history of the Second World War, his biography of his ancestor, the first Duke of Marlborough, and his memoirs “My Early Life”. Having expected the Nobel Peace Prize, his interest evaporated the moment when he learned that it was the author who was honoured, not the statesman. When the ceremony came near, Churchill was

⁴ Jenkins, ...

⁵ Gilbert, A Life...

⁶ Roberts, Churchill...

lucky enough to have an appointment with US-President Eisenhower in Bermuda so that he had a solid excuse for staying away and sending Clementine in his stead. - For his unwavering steadfastness during the war he arguably had deserved the Nobel Peace Prize: it was after all under his leadership that Great Britain ensured the defeat of Nazi Germany, a necessary prerequisite for the restoration of a peace worthy of the name.

Modern social policy was not Churchill's turf. A conservative of the Victorian age, he could not quite comprehend its advantages, suspecting vile radical socialism behind every measure aiming at the introduction of a welfare state. He lost the general election of summer 1945 and was one of the very few to be bewildered by its outcome.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm once told me that he considered Winston Churchill's political record as a collection of disasters. One thing, however, the latter had done well even in Hobsbawm's eyes: the way he brought the nation through the war. As far as I, the author, am concerned I cannot quite agree with Hobsbawm's judgement. It has been useful, though, because it served as an incentive for being on the lookout for those things Churchill did do well.

His consistent rejection of Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy set in late, in 1938, but it was timely enough. And Churchill's wartime stance procured him the status of a superstar in British history. Interestingly, his opposition to appeasement did not extend to other fascist leaders. It is a sad fact, and little known, that Spain's dictator Francisco Franco could rely on Churchill's support even when the British military advised otherwise.

Who was the greatest Briton of all times, the BBC asked in 2002. A majority of nearly 500,000 television spectators voted for Churchill, before Shakespeare, Elizabeth I, and Admiral Nelson.⁷ Meanwhile, the halo surrounding him, or rather the mythical figure he has become, has been darkened by accusations berating him as a racist, an imperialist and a warmonger. Indeed, to a certain degree he was all of that – and more. He was a child of his time, that is of the Victorian age which, naturally, determined his perspective; and he went out of his way trying to slow down what seemed to him the deplorable, if inexorable, progress of time.

This became evident, for example in his attitude towards India and his views of Mahatma Gandhi. By the early 1930s, politicians of all parties had resigned themselves to envisaging a certain degree of autonomy for India. Churchill was outraged. For petty reasons that had nothing to do with India, he had managed, once again, to fall out with the Tory party leadership. In 1931 he lost his place in Stanley Baldwin's shadow cabinet and spent the ensuing eight years in what is known as the “wilderness”, i.e., on the back benches. To the increasing exasperation of almost every member of the House he kept railing against the alleged betrayal of the Empire, smearing Gandhi as “a fakir of a type well-known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Vice-regal palace [...] to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor”. Churchill thundered: “Gandhi has become the symbol and the almost godlike champion of all those forces which are now working for our exclusion from India.”⁸

⁷ Fielding, ...

⁸ Herman, ...

While shaping British history of the 20th century in quite a few aspects, Churchill intrinsically remained a man of the 19th century. Some of his contemporaries described him as a romantic, and it was not meant as a flattery. In line with his being rooted in the past, Churchill hung on to the idea of Empire while foreseeing, and witnessing, its demise. He held up imperial grand sovereignty while the Empire's grandeur was on the decline.

When Elizabeth II ascended the royal throne in 1952, Churchill was seventy-seven years of age and for the second time Prime Minister. His life span encompassed several epochs, including a number of what is euphemistically known as “interesting times”. He was born in 1874 and was to serve under five British monarchs; he died in 1965 as an enchanted admirer of Queen Elizabeth. The years of his youth saw the invention of the motor car, by the year of his death mankind had begun to conquer outer space. Before the Great War, Britain's social order was traditionally stable. Remnants of feudalism had survived. Patriarchal hierarchy at home and in public was hardly challenged. Alms of charity poured a gloss of benevolence over prevailing inequalities. Daughters and sons of the lower orders had the choice: Either they took the risk of getting into trouble with the authorities, which was easily done by, for example, taking part in a strike; or they deferred to their betters. Facing the charge of creating social unrest, most gave in to their lot. That was, broadly speaking, how society functioned in Churchill's youth.

A young lady who refused Churchill's marriage proposal, preferring to stay friends with him, later said: “The first time you meet Winston you see all his faults, and the rest of your life you spend in discovering his virtues.”⁹ While working on this book, I have made a comparable experience. Over time I noticed how urgently - despite his egocentric rudeness - Churchill was in need of harmonious relationships with his family, friends and staff. I became aware of his suffering at the hands of brutal schoolmasters and equally sadistic older boys, of the loneliness he endured as a child and teenager. I have seen his longing for company and recognition as well as his endearing tenderness towards his wife, mother of their five children, who for more than half a century gave him the feeling of security he needed for setting out happily into risky adventures. I have been amused by his anarchist eccentricity, by the ways in which he conducted his affairs while burbling in a bathtub, by his good sense of humour, his childlike playfulness, and his consciously celebrated extravagancies. He enjoyed playing with cards as well as with words. His urge to communicate did not spare the animal realm - dogs, cats, birds, and fish: he talked to them all.

I, a woman, have portrayed a man who would have readily admitted being a macho, had he known the word; a politician who, although he liked conversations with clever women, only in 1927 fully accepted the introduction of women's suffrage. Over time, I have come to regard Churchill almost as a daughter would look upon her father. Or, more to the point, I have studied him as a young secretary would observe her employer, the statesman Winston Churchill who easily explodes with rage, only to beg for forgiveness a few moments later. Historiographically, this method of approaching a subject is called “empathetic understanding”.

⁹ Jenkins, ...

And this is how I for one have understood Churchill: as a man of great imaginative power, endowed with an impressive array of knowledge and a charmingly naive sense of curiosity. He was inherently unable to stick to any “ism” with radical zealotry. This is true even for his colonialism, his racism, and his anti-communism. By contrast, his faithful adherence to the concept of the British Empire amounted to far more than imperialist imperiousness: The British Empire stood for everything that was worthy and dear to him. He cherished the Empire as others cherish the memory of their parents.

Rudolf Augstein, my late father, published a book on Jesus Christ (“Jesus Menschensohn”). He sought to differentiate between the man Jesus and the biblical son of God. I for my part have no desire to dabble with transcendental matters; just like Churchill, I think the world itself is miraculous enough.

It seemed relatively easy for me to follow Churchill's ways of thought and to find my way through his times. This is not least due to the fact that I have lived and studied in England for several years. I have got to know the country well enough to like it even for some of the things that do not function as they ought to.

This book tells the story of a statesman whose aspiration circled around purely worldly matters, and whose convictions rested on three pillars: the British Empire, the monarchy, and representative democracy as it had developed in Great Britain and is embodied by the House of Commons. I have shown how Churchill saw the world and how the world has been looking at him. My work of going through the proof copies of this book was accomplished by January 2024. Whether this book is an accomplished piece of work is for others to decide. The proof lies in the reading.

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Epilogue: CODA

Many former statesmen, looking back on their times of active duty, chose to correct their political record. Rare by comparison were those who penned internal memoranda and public speeches in view of their memoirs to be published in a distant future. Churchill was always both: a man of action and the self-conscious object of his autobiography. Once the sufferings of his school days lay behind, life seemed to him “an endless moving picture in which one was an actor”.¹⁰ Possibly, he was naturally disposed to observe himself from the outside, as it were. Perhaps, it was a habit he developed during the unhappy and lonely years at boarding school. For him as the spectator of his life it was just a step to adopting the role of its biographer. The greatest applause he earned for those of his public speeches that he designed having both in view: a present audience and generations of future listeners.

When the day of Churchill's eightieth birthday had come, the House of Commons convened for a session in his honour. Clement Attlee, the leader of the Labour party, found fine words of praise, underlining the historical importance of the Prime Minister's wartime oratories. Churchill's reply is a rhetorical monument in its own right: “It was the nation and race

¹⁰ Churchill, Early Life...

dwelling all round the globe that had the lion heart”, he said, “I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.”¹¹

Sometimes during the war, however, Churchill was rather in the mood of meowing. Occasionally he had to fight with exhausted despondency, as anyone would who bears great responsibility. Of course, only those nearest to the PM would know when those moments occurred – and often he would not mention them to anyone. Cultivating a public and a private identity is anything but unusual. Most people do it, some more so, some less. As for Churchill, in the privacy of his innermost being a feeling arose that grew into an unpleasant certainty: that the world as he knew it was destined to disappear and that it had been his lot to help bringing this historical process about. It was a thought he wished to hide from himself. It would not have occurred to him to elaborate on it in his writings.

At the end of the Great, Britain was financially denuded. During the Second World War it was, as Churchill put it, “flayed to the bone”.¹² In order to finance the war effort cabinet was compelled to hand Britain’s assets over to the USA and take on debts to a ruinous extent. While the British establishment cultivated a slightly arrogant attitude towards the Americans, Churchill always had his very own “special relationship” with the United States. After all, his mother was born in New York. Right after his appointment as PM he had begun beseeching President Roosevelt that the USA should come to Britain’s aid. He had reason to believe that it was in no small part thanks to his entreaties when the Lend-Lease-Act finally was passed, allowing Britain to continue fighting. That was something to be proud of, on the one hand. On the other hand, Washington treated Great Britain without the slightest generosity. While the Soviet Union received incredibly great amounts of weaponry, raw materials and food for free, Britain was fleeced as if she were the political antagonist.

As a matter of fact, Roosevelt and his government did not like the Empire. British imperialism was incompatible with peoples’ right of self-determination. Hence, weakening the British Empire was one of Washington’s less explicitly pronounced war aims. With Great Britain aching under the weight of her debt, and a power vacuum always being a bit of a waste, to say the least, the United States of America stood ready to take over global leadership. Churchill registered the antecedents to this new world order with a mixture of dismay, anger and disbelief. But he could not bring himself to draw the conclusion: With a pinch of salt, for nationalist movements also had an impact, it can be said that by winning the war for Great Britain, he lost the Empire and thus his *raison d’être*.

After the war, most Britons, including those on the left of the political spectrum, took years to acknowledge the fact that the Empire was doomed. Many Britons lived in the hope, former colonies might freely choose to be part of the Commonwealth of Nations so that in the end, for them, nothing much would change. In line with modern political taste “Empire” became, as Churchill’s observed contemptuously, a “naughty” word. He for his part insisted on speaking of the “Empire” – at least in this respect he wanted to assert his will.

In order not to squander their aggressive instincts on party feuds instead of fighting Hitler, the Tory party and Labour had united in a coalition government. Churchill and his deputy

¹¹ Churchill, *The Best...*

¹² Hastings, *Finest Years...*

Clement Attlee got on well with each other. Thus, Labour had the opportunity to prove that they were no less capable of running the country than the Tories. After the war, the Labour Party had attained respectability, and the union movement was an established force. During his second premiership, Churchill readily agreed to improvements of working conditions the unions demanded, on the whole he had largely given up on maintaining the social order of the past. In any case, the old man focused his remaining energy on foreign policy and saving the Empire. Yet, his endeavours were all in vain. This “giant” (Margaret Thatcher), this “bad man” (Richard Burton) was a tragic figure. Occasionally the truth entered his mind – for instance when he told his private secretary: “I have worked all my life, and I have achieved a great deal – in the end to achieve NOTHING.”¹³

It seems unlikely that Churchill could pursue a political career today. Purifying his outdated morals according to modern sensitivities would not suffice. There were some sides to his character that would clearly speak against him: His irascibility, his brutal honesty in belittling competitors, and his lack of talent for intrigue add up to the conclusion that he would be considered as a nuisance even by his own party colleagues. The historian David Cannadine, considering the entire British aristocracy as a rather useless caste, harbours no sympathy for its bourgeois offspring Winston Churchill. But even he cannot forego considerable praise, stating that with Churchill’s resignation, in April 1955, British public life has lost broadness of mind, poetry of expression, and brilliance of speech, probably never again to be attained.

It was one of Churchill’s many bad habits that he always wanted to have the last word. Well, he may have it: “Words are the only things that last forever.”¹⁴

¹³ See above p. xxx.

¹⁴ Reynolds, Command...

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Press Overview

Die Zeit online, 28.02.2024

A brilliant biography.

Neue Züricher Zeitung, 21.03.2024

The man who defeated Hitler: Franziska Augstein writes about Winston Churchill with admiration and yet without sparing him. [Churchill] was convinced that peace was only possible if Nazi Germany was defeated completely: journalist Franziska Augstein has dedicated an outstanding biography to Winston Churchill.

Anyone who dares to write a monograph on Winston Churchill (1874-1965) has to do a huge amount of reading beforehand. [...] This is precisely where Franziska Augstein's first merit lies: In the last three decades, there has been no German Churchill biography that could rival this book in terms of quantity and quality. Anyone with little knowledge of Churchill and his time will, after reading this book, have a comprehensive picture of Churchill's long, epoch-spanning life, which stretched from the Victorian British Empire at her greatest extent to the Little England that the country finally became - shaken by the Second World War and its grave financial consequences.

Augstein's book reads like a novel. Winston Churchill emerges from its pages almost as if it were a good feature film.

However, the perspective from which the book was written is also remarkable: 'As a woman, I wrote about a man from a patriarchal world,' Augstein states. And continues: 'Over time, I have come to regard Churchill almost as a daughter would look upon her father. Or, more to the point, I have studied him as a young secretary would observe her employer, the statesman Winston Churchill who easily explodes with rage, only to beg for forgiveness a few moments later. Historiographically, this method of approaching a subject is called "empathetic understanding.'

[...]

Augstein also pays tribute to [Churchill's] achievement, the unconditional will to persevere and the conviction that peace in Europe was only possible if Nazi Germany was defeated completely, while openly confronting Churchill's darker side at the same time: the problem of his imperialism and racism.

Is there anything to criticise? Hardly. Franziska Augstein has only made a few minor inaccuracies. [...] 'I have shown how Churchill saw the world and how the world has been looking at him. If I have succeeded in doing so is for the readers to decide.', writes the author in her foreword. The answer is clear. Franziska Augstein is a meticulous historian, always contextualising the facts and vividly portraying the characters of the protagonists. With this book, she has achieved the perfect balance between empathic understanding and sober distance.

Der Freitag, 21.03.2024

Franziska Augstein's biography of Winston Churchill offers first-class entertainment in sparkling language.

Cicero, 04.2024

The life story of a political titan, who promised his people blood and tears, when impelling the despondent London establishment to unconditional resistance against the seemingly overpowering Nazi Germany, unfolds over 600 entertaining pages. [...]

Augstein does not tear down a monument from its pedestal, but rather reminds the reader of unpleasant truths [...]. The author leaves judgements and criticism to contemporaries such as the journalist Alfred George Gardiner [...].

FAZ, 10.05.2024

[...] it [is] difficult to decide where a biography of Churchill ends and a general history of British politics, society and the public sphere begins.

Franziska Augstein overcomes the challenge by drawing on the existing biographical literature and supplementing it with research on selected topics. She combines a thematical and a chronological approach. [...] Although this occasionally leads to the account leaping forward and backward, her reasoning always remains easy to follow. Augstein describes the motivation for the book as a thoroughly personal attempt to form an opinion on Churchill. Accordingly, the aim is not to present new findings but rather to contextualise what is known against the background of contemporary issues [...]

Augstein's well-balanced account ends with a brief overview of the development of Churchill's image in current political debates as well as in the media. In addition to the heroization and the sharp criticism, Augstein notes above all a marginalization, as can be seen in Churchill's figure as a mere supporting act in "The Crown". The biography is also intended to remedy this development.

Die Presse am Sonntag, 07.04.2024

A Churchill biography that is hard to imagine better. [...] a brilliant balancing act between empathy and criticism.

P.M. History 7/2024

[...] there are plenty of biographies about him. But none has ever been so clear in tone, so to the point in the selection of what is worth telling and so close and critically distanced at the same time.

Frankfurter Rundschau, 17.06.2024

Franziska Augstein has produced a brilliant biography of this politician. She has skilfully embedded Churchill's life in contemporary history. Linguistically, the book is a pleasure to read.