

CHURCHILL AT SEVENTY-FIVE

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I held the corresponding post in Australia.*

Most men will argue about most things. But few will fail to agree that Winston Spencer Churchill, who next Wednesday will celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday, is the greatest fighting man among political leaders of our time. To say this is not to undervalue such men as Franklin Roosevelt; it is merely to say that they were different. They had other methods, and other subtleties. We are not to choose, except rashly. 'There is one glory of the sun, and other glory of the moon, and other glory of the stars: For one star differeth from another star in glory.'

As one who in a small way knows and has worked with Winston Churchill, I do not intend to talk about controversial matters. In our far-separated spheres, we are both Leaders of Oppositions; we are both, in a parliamentary sense, living in Bleak House, but have Great Expectations. But why be controversial when we think or speak or write of a great Englishman who enjoys the remarkable advantage at being of once mortal and immortal; detested or loved for his domestic politics; venerated at St George's and reviled (on strict party lines) at Stepney; but remembered in the prayers of all the sons and daughters of Great Britain as a hero and deliverer?

It is of the already admittedly immortal Churchill that I write; not by the histories or the leading articles, but as I have seen him; first, before the war, and second, during it.

My first sight of him from the gallery of the old House of Commons. He was (and almost chronically, as it seemed) out of office. His seat flanked the Treasury benches. He stood, with hunched shoulders, looking like a mischievous and twinkling Puck, baiting Ramsay MacDonald. As I looked at him from above, I could see the typed sheets of his notes, and was disappointed at my discovery that speeches in England are so frequently read, with every phrase prepared. (Lloyd George once told me that he learned his by heart, as indeed, as he told me, did J. M. Barrie.) But the disappointment faded rapidly. Here was the master of the pause, the gesture, the almost diabolical faculty of making the prepared phrase the unexpected impromptu. 'That, Mr. Speaker, was when I ventured to describe the right honourable gentleman as – er – ah – the boneless wonder!'

Yet Churchill, was as we say, 'on the outer'. The people were against him; on rearmament, on the abdication, on appeasement of the dictators. He was brilliant, and therefore unexpected. We distrust brilliance; it dazzles and confuses us; we feel like rabbits mesmerized in the headlights of a motor car. And, on the whole, we prefer a diet of comfortable platitudes to the rough nourishment of the unusual idea. 'Ah, yet,' old gentlemen would say, 'Winston is a remarkable fellow; reminds me very much of Randolph, his father; but safety first, I say.' He had his little group of devoted House of Commons followers. He laid bricks at Chartwell. He communed with old warriors like Ian Hamilton. He delved into and brilliantly recorded the life of John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough. But, for a man of his ardent temperament, he was under-employed, frustrated.

Then the war came, and things went wrong. The Norwegian expedition went wrong. True, Churchill was back at the Admiralty, his first love, and the Navy was in great shape. But the people cried aloud for change, and Labour would come in, but only under Churchill. And so he became Prime Minister, with a collapsing France, and a triumphant enemy, and England, in the phrase of the French cynic, about 'to have her neck wrung like a chicken'!

The rest is history. Ramsay MacDonald, Baldwin, Chamberlain, each of whom had in his day been a representative British leader, and each of whom, as I shall always believe, contributed, in spite of errors and weaknesses, to that superb national unity which meant so much, could never have stood in

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the imminent deadly breach and rallied the forces of freedom against all odds and all reason. For Churchill was, and is, unique. It was my fortune to see him at close quarters in the early months of 1941, when the United States was still neutral (though miraculously benevolent) and Russia had not been invaded. They were dark days, in all conscience. But Winston was an abiding presence – a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night.

What was his secret? He loves his country with a deep passion; but so did millions of others, from the royal palace to the bombed ruins of Shoreditch. He is a superb fighting man, but so were the heroes of the Battle for Britain, and the Atlantic convoys, and the Western Desert. He is a great speaker, but great speakers are not unique.

Let me try to answer my own question:

Winston Churchill is a patriot in a land of patriots. But he was able to do two things superbly well. One was to clothe his patriotism in moving language, clearly understood by all, without any affectation of superiority, with no taint of pomposity, and above all with the occasional flash of deep rage or sheer boyish fun which raised the morale of a sorely tried people. ‘Good old Winnie,’ they would say, ‘he knows how we feel!’

He knew this atmosphere, and was at immense pains to create and preserve it. He dictated his speeches, his broadcasts, his messages. As an occasional onlooker at the process, I was fascinated by his utter concentration, his audible but whispered search for the right word, the simple word, the word to sink into the ears of the listeners, unambiguous, unclouded. He spoke not for pride but for power and effect. It would be foolish to pretend that he did not know that in a real sense he was speaking to posterity, but it would be wrong and unjust not to recognize that his great preoccupation was with the maintenance of a fighting spirit and single mind without which there might be no free posterity at all.

He despised danger, but he understood it. He understood in his blood the poetry and pride of a most civilized people. He was the voice of a people. That is what has given to his speeches a quality of universality and timelessness which sets them apart from all others of his age and time.

What in other men might have been mere histrionics were in him the natural garments of the spirit. I will never forget how, clad in his famous and almost comic-opera ‘siren suit’, he would enter the historic Cabinet room at Downing Street, take his seat in dead silence, pull his truculent and tilted cigar from his mouth, turn his light, bright, blue eyes around the table, and say: ‘Gentlemen, we have the signal honour of being responsible for our country at a time of deadly danger, and of bad news. We will proceed with the business.’

It sounds prosaic, but it was a call to action. Backs became straighter, and pulses quicker.

Winston Churchill was the fighting man. But he was a very special kind of fighter. He produced his greatest efforts in disaster. He always seemed to me to extract a curious sort of pleasure from the contemplation of difficulties. He had a trick of talking about some current problem, and painting the picture in the blackest colours. Then having, so to speak, posed the problem at its worst, he would proceed to think aloud; tearing at the problem, fighting it.

There was something curiously physical about his thinking. When he was in full cry after some solution, and you wanted to ‘stay with him’, you came to regard walking furiously up and down the central hall at Chequers as a new kind of mental exercise. His brain fought, almost with violence.

His concentration was incredible. The art of concentrating the faculties upon one problem at a time, never leaving it half-way, is a rare art. Most of us have minds like butterflies, fluttering from one

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plant to another. The man who can immerse himself in his problems, forgetting all else and undisturbed by distraction, can achieve more in a day than most men in a week.

Churchill gave himself, in those great days, no respite. He would go to bed at about 2 a.m. and be sitting up next morning early, with black coffee and a cigar, reading and mastering reports, dictating directives. By lunchtime he had done a day's work. After lunch he went to bed; right into bed; not into one of those stertorous, sprawling naps in an armchair which are the fashion of some. By 4.30 he was back at his papers and his interviews, with probably a War Cabinet meeting from 5.30 to about 8.

Then dinner (which he enjoyed, as a sound man should), and after dinner discussion with some noted visitor or staff, pacing up and down. By about 11 p.m. he was likely as not to have evolved some new idea. Shrill sounded the telephones, and, hurriedly withdrawn from the contemplation of their beds in came the Chiefs of Staff, to advise, to refute, to calculate, to be praised or rebuked, but always to be stimulated.

I know that Winston Churchill, if he ever chances to read these lines, will not mind if I recount, after the lapse of years, the interest with which I heard him once deal (in about March of 1941) with a recommendation that holiday leave should be given to senior members of the Civil Service. The Minister concerned put up a clear case. Principal Civil Servants had toiled unremittingly under great strain for many months; their efficiency was suffering; on a suitable roster they ought to be given rest and recreation.

Now this proposition was put to a man whose versatility is astonishing; who had relaxed the bow-string whenever possible; who had varied the monotony of normal toil by laying bricks, building cottages, painting pictures, practising French on uncomplaining Frenchmen, aghast at his French grammar, but staggered by his vocabulary. 'Ah,' I thought, 'these Civil Servants have brought their goods to the right market.' But though the Prime Minister agreed in his heart, what did he say? 'Well, so-and-so, if you say so, no doubt it ought to be done. But I confess I cannot understand it. Here are great events; who would wish to be absent while they are played out? How can any man want to be a spectator when he could be in the thick of it? It baffles me.'

It must not be supposed from this pronouncement that Churchill was a heartless man; he is, on the contrary, like so many ruling Englishmen, full of sentiment under the surface. Nor was he unaware of the great work of the Civil Servant; no Minister of the Crown is or could be ignorant or contemptuous of it. But he was Churchill. There was a war on. It should be the sole business in hand. Let every man die with his boots on.

There was another aspect of Churchill's magnificent concentration. He did not appear to be a good listener. His prejudices appeared strong. He disliked criticism of things of which he approved. One night at Chequers, after a visit of mine to the naval dockyards at Devonport, I criticized what I had seen. Great heavens! Within five seconds I was made aware that I had laid impious hands on the Ark of the Covenant. Churchill of the Admiralty received my shower of small shot and blasted me with a Nelsonian broadside. But, next day, I heard every criticism fired by Churchill across the table, for investigation and answer.

Even in the act of resisting he absorbed. His concentration on the job; his habit of thinking aloud, of arranging his ideas in words, might make him seem intolerant of crosstalk or criticism; but he missed nothing. Indeed, the formidable impact of his personality, the fact that he was an almost fearsome legendary figure in his own lifetime, did us all good. We learned to speak when we had something to say, and to reduce it to the clearest and most concise terms.

In my time with him, two people were his masters, and they were both women. One was that gracious and most companionable and attractive woman, his wife. I have seen her, with loud cheers of

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encouragement from myself, order Winston back into bed on a raw day when nothing would do but that he, suffering from a heavy cold, should go out to witness some interesting experiments in anti-aircraft defences.

His daughter Mary was then a girl in her late teens. She was as charming, natural, and lovely a girl as one might see in a year's march. She was the flower of his days. It is one of my lasting memories that, after dinner at Chequers, we would come out into the hall for coffee, then, in deference to the Australian visitor, the spokesman for a country whose soldiers at that time were chasing the Italians out of Cyrenaica, Churchill would say, 'Mary, put on "Waltzing Matilda".' And to the music of that genuinely Australian song, he would waltz gravely around the hall, a boy's grin on his face, and the light of a rich human understanding in his eyes.

By the irony of political history, he was dismissed from office almost in the hour of his triumph. But no temporary political judgement on current and domestic politics can ever obscure the fact that in many millions of simple homes all over the world his birthday will be celebrated with thankfulness to God that in the world's years of agony He raised up as a Minister and servant of the people a man of clear faith, immeasurable courage, matchless leadership, and rare executive skill, whose name will live in the last pages of human history.