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CHURCHILL WITHOUT THE RHETORIC

Winston Churchill: studies in statesmanship. Edited by R. A. C. Parker. London and Washington: Brassey's, 1995. Pp. xxi + 259. ISBN 1-857-53151-5. £30.

Winston Churchill's last campaign: Britain and the Cold War, 1951–1985. By John W. Young. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. ISBN 0-198-20367-5. £45.

Churchill peacetime ministry, 1951–1955. By Henry Pelling. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1997. Pp. ix + 216. ISBN 0-333-67709-9. £16.

Churchill as peacemaker. Edited by James W. Muller. Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center and Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xii + 344. ISBN 0-521-58314-4. £35.

Churchill and secret service. By David Stafford. London: John Murray, 1997. Pp. xiii + 386. ISBN 0-719-55407-1. £25.

Churchill and Hitler, in victory and defeat. By John Strawson. London: Constable, 1997. Pp. xxxi + 540. ISBN 0-094-75840-9. £20.

Over the course of the last decade, historians have set themselves the task of rescuing Churchill from the restrictive embalmment of hero worship. This has been no easy task. His 1930s campaign for rearmament and opposition to appeasement, his 'finest hour' in 1940, and his 1946 'Iron Curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri, secured for him on both sides of the Atlantic an almost unparalleled relevance in the rhetoric of the following forty years' Cold War. To Western politicians of this period, his career offered pertinent 'lessons' – particularly the need to appear resolute in the face or threat of aggression. To this was added the fact that his magnificent command of English made him a rich quarry of quasi-prophetic quotes for an endless succession of political speeches and journalistic articles.

In attempting to peel off this varnish to reveal the detail of the original, the first generation of post-Cold War historians has been confronted with a particular difficulty. In seeking to save Churchill from the self-serving distortions of the last forty years of political debate, historians have opened *themselves* up to the accusation of political bias. Churchill revisionists have found their angle invariably prefixed as 'left' or, more usually, 'right wing'. Indeed, the very relevance of Churchill's actions in regard to modern times has made it difficult for any contemporary judgement on him to avoid being viewed as the product of the particular political outlook (real or supposed) of the historian. One of the most obvious examples where this charge had substance was Clive Ponting's 1994 biography *Churchill*, which proved to be a remorseless attack on his reputation, chronicling (and ocasionally misunderstanding) every utterance which fell short of a 1990s socio-political criterion of the centre-left. The great cause célèbre, however, had come from a different angle the previous year. This was John Charmley's *Churchill, the end of glory*. Generating considerable discussion, Dr Charmley's study concluded in 1945 with the assessment that Churchill's contribution had ended in failure: it has bequeathed a world in which the British Empire's contraction was accelerated, whilst at the same time the Soviet Empire was able to expand to cover half of Europe and socialism was taking hold in Britain.

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Charmley's analysis (and a subsequent work by him, *Churchill's grand alliance*, which sought to highlight the result of his actions as being Britain's subservience to the United States) was published in the midst of a bumper crop of studies on Churchill. Martin Gilbert, Sheila Lawlor, Andrew Roberts, and Norman Rose were amongst those whose works on Churchill and his circle were also published around the same time. These followed the publication in 1992 of Paul Addison's masterly account of Churchill's attitudes to domestic policy, *Churchill on the home front*, and an invaluable collection of essays edited by Robert Blake and Wm. Roger Louis, *Churchill* (1993), which assessed different aspects of his career and outlook.

The latest batch of Churchill books, reviewed in this article, are amongst those published since this burst of heightened productivity in the early 1990s. Whereas the essays edited by Blake and Louis were the fruit of a conference held at the University of Texas at Austin, the collection in *Winston Churchill: studies in statesmanship*, edited by Alastair Parker, developed from a colloquium at Churchill College, Cambridge. Compared to the magisterial span of the Blake and Louis collection, the reach of *Studies in statemanship* is understandably more limited. The work of David Reynolds, both in the Blake and Louis collection and elsewhere, which argued that Churchill's attitude towards fighting on in 1940 was more complicated than has been previously caricatured, is not really added to in Bernd Martin's article on the same theme. Furthermore, Martin makes some highly debatable contentions, not least of which is his suggestion that Churchill's desire to bring Lloyd George into the War Cabinet may have been motivated by the hope that, if need be, the Welsh Wizard would be well placed to conduct peace negotiations. This apart, the essays in *Studies in statesmanship* successfully complement the Blake and Louis collection. Brian McKercher and Phillips O'Brien demonstrate Churchill's less than subservient attitude to the United States and its naval pretensions in the 1920s. Warren Kimball regards as simplistic 'the perfectionist clamour' which sees the notion of the 'good war' indelibly besmirched by the consequence of the Communist take-over of Eastern Europe. He provides a hard-headed analysis of the relative attitudes of Churchill and Roosevelt towards Comrade Stalin, highlighting the degrees of co-operation and conflict between the two leaders of the Western world and the importance in this respect of their attitude towards the future status of Poland. Accusations that Roosevelt sought to weaken Britain's world role in the post-war settlement have been exaggerated according to Kimball, who shares David Dilks's summary of the situation from 1945 onwards that 'the great fear of the British was not that the Americans would dominate everything in the post-war world, but that they would go away'.

Studies in statesmanship fills two main gaps in the Blake and Louis collection: it provides a platform for European scholars and is weighted towards Churchill's record in the post-war world (the primary focus of only three of twenty-nine studies in the Blake and Louis compendium). In that collection, the late Max Beloff argued persuasively that, as far as Britain was concerned, Churchill was a firm Euro-sceptic. Although, in *Studies in statesmanship*, Martin Gilbert largely keeps out of this debate in his article on 'the European idea', other contributors to the book provide no shortage of evidence to support Beloff's contention. Maurice Vaisse and Hans-Peter Schwarz give valuable perspectives on Churchill's relations with Paris and Bonn. Churchill accepted German rearmament and Adenauer would have preferred building Germany's political links primarily with Britain rather than with France. However, Churchill made clear to France's ambassador, René Massigli, that he did not want British submersion into a

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European federation. This altered Bonn's perspective and Adenauer even began to fear that in exchange for the reunification of Germany, Churchill might be prepared to negotiate the country's neutrality in direct negotiations with Moscow (which, apart from anything else, would have probably prevented the creation of the EEC). Such fears encouraged the German chancellor to see the United States as the Bundesrepublik's principal guardian. Wolfgang Kriger provides an admirable summary of Churchill's attitude to the possibility of a European Defence Community, which he was not sorry to see scuppered in the French parliament. By then, French politicians had come to resent both Churchill's lack of interest in getting involved on France's behalf in Indochina (which, had he done so, would have greatly increased East–West tension) and his addiction to seeking a European settlement while ignoring the input of the 'Europeans' through an Anglo–U.S.–Soviet summit.

In one of his most famous broadcasts of 1940, Churchill had rallied his people with the notion that if they could stand up to Hitler then 'all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands', whilst failure would result in 'the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of a perverted science'. After the defeat of Nazism, Churchill was haunted by the realization that victory did not lead to the liberty of half of Europe and that the world's prospects were darkening under the shadow of the A-Bomb. Trying to create a détente which would relieve this tension was the cause of his last crusade, a trek which encouraged him to stay on in office for more than a year after a stroke which should have provided the excuse for him to call it a day. This is the subject of John Young's *Winston Churchill's last campaign*. A detailed archival knowledge of government documents, supplemented by those made public in France and the United States, ensures that the result is a considerable feat of scholarship. It is sure to be the definitive account of an attempt at power politics which, following the Bermuda Conference, left Churchill looking, in Clement Attlee's words, like a 'Father Christmas without any presents'. This forlorn journey, which proved such a source of annoyance to Eisenhower and exasperation for Eden, also looms large in the broader ranging assessment, *Churchill's peacetime ministry*, by the late Henry Pelling. Making use of cabinet papers and the recently released Avon (Eden) archive which were unavailable to Anthony Seldon's weighty 1981 study of the subject, *Churchill's Indian summer*, Pelling provides a brief but incisive account of a government embracing progressive ideas in domestic policy, whilst the fading giant at its helm battled against decline (national and personal) on the world stage.

As with the other studies, Pelling's narrative demonstrates that far from being a busted flush, Churchill's administration was an active one and even in the final months of his protracted grip on office the prime minister was able, on occasion, to rally himself sufficiently to deliver a spasm of eloquence and energy. His objectives in foreign policy remained beyond his grasp, but he managed to avoid the errors which plunged the government of an unbridled Eden into deep crisis. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that it was not selfishness alone which delayed Churchill from passing the reigns of the premiership on to his highly strung foreign secretary.

Churchill as peacemaker, a collection of essays produced by Cambridge University Press in association with the Woodrow Wilson Center, provides further evidence of the way in which historians on both sides of the Atlantic have adapted to the end of the Cold War by focusing on Churchill's involvement in international mediation at the expense of his previous image as the redoubtable bulldog of an uncompromising Western armed

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security. As is emphasized by the motto for his war memoirs, reprinted at the front of the collection, Churchill's belief 'in War: Resolution' was matched by 'in Victory: Magnanimity' and 'in Peace: Goodwill'. This attitude is particularly evident in Paul Addison's chapter discussing Churchill's involvement in finding a political settlement to the problem of Ireland. He was more readily prepared than most of his cabinet colleagues in 1921 to offer Sinn Fein a generous political settlement, but only once a situation had been established whereby the latter knew they – and not London – would be negotiating from a position of weakness. Nor, in 1914, had he been the zealous persecutor of the north as painted in Ulster Unionist demonology. On the contrary, 'no one was more active in seeking to find a solution acceptable to all parties'. But neither should there by any doubt about the lengths he would go in supporting the actions of the Black and Tans and the dark arts of the intelligence community. In *Churchill and secret service*, David Stafford provides a gripping account of this neglected side of Churchill's interests which brought out in him different aspects of his character: a vivid imagination, an interest in scientific invention, and the unyielding determination to secure the defence of the realm.

One of Stafford's main achievements is that he never succumbs to the temptation to let the colourful and clandestine figures, replete with their fantansies and conspiracy plots, deflect him from keeping a sense of proportion about his subject-matter. Fascinated by the military world in which he had at one time embarked, Churchill was irresistibly drawn to the domain of the secret intelligence service, of which he was one of the earliest proponents. Yet, for all his early enthusiasm for the wilder excesses of covert activities (of which his activities against the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s and the hounding of the pacifist Labour politician, George Lansbury, particularly stand out) Churchill matured into a statesman who was better prepared than many in authority to face down the more extreme antics of British secret service and to express prescient concerns about the growing power of MI5. The party leader, who famously fulminated against a socialist 'Gestapo' if Labour won the 1945 election, was close enough to the mind-set of those in the secret service world to fear that they equally represented a threat to liberty.

Much of the last decade's revisionist output has been written, according to an essay by the late Sir Robert Rhodes James in *Churchill as peacemaker*, 'by young men of somewhat limited horizons with no personal political experience; also, none of them has even seen Churchill in person, let alone met him'. Rhodes James contrasts these historians with 'those of us who were alive in 1940 – and what a year it was to be alive in England'. For this group 'there is an imperishable emotion of gratitude and affection that inevitably colours our view of him'. To those revisionists who would respond 'exactly!' to this last observation, Major-General Strawson has his own retort. Despite its title, Strawson's *Churchill and Hitler: in victor and defeat* is weighted heavily towards Churchill, a lop-sided imbalance made more pronounced by the difficulty of comparing two largely incompatible career developments (a task only achieved with any conviction by John Lukacs in his 1986 psychological study, *The duel: Hitler versus Churchill* – which Strawson does not cite). Rightly conscious of Churchill's moral qualities and Hitler's depravity, Strawson none the less misses the opportunity in what is supposed to be a comparative study to spell out what they had in common – a belief in the force of history, of personal and national destiny, a tenacity of spirit and the power to inspire. Rejecting the revisionist perspective, Strawson instead takes as his seminal text Sir Isaiah Berlin's depiction of the way in which Churchill galvanized the nation in his

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1949 account, *Mr Churchill in 1940*. Strawson's narrative is designed to show that in searching out every minor discrepancy, every contradictory detail, every counter-factual wish list, revisionist academics have missed the central point of overriding importance – that Churchill's contribution was what he encouraged the public to perceive it to be, and when it mattered it was invaluable. Far from being 'the end of glory', in tying Britain to the crusade against fascism Churchill has bequeathed his country an eternal glow. Strawson dismisses John Charmley's allegation that Churchill's handling of the war plunged his country into socialism, global decline and subservience to the United States on the grounds that by the 1990s the country had actually borne up quite well against these developments. To this, one can only summarize by saying that Charmley believes in bottles being half empty, and Strawson in them being half full. In any case, concludes Strawson, Churchill stood for more than anti-socialism, the British Empire and national independence. He also believed in 'world order', in great states and civilization, in American democracy, in France and Anglo-French accord. Judged by these criteria Churchill did not fail in his objectives.

In reinforcing a traditional view of Churchill, Strawson's account stands out against the tide of interpretation advanced by the other historians discussed in this review. What ties together these contributions is an attempt to view Churchill as a far more complicated politician than was conveyed by the simple image of the tenacious bulldog, which was essential for national confidence in 1940 but not necessarily applicable at other times. This is unlikely to be the final word on the subject. Like the enduring interest in William Shakespeare, the man who narrowly pipped Churchill at the post in a popular radio vote on Britain's 'man of the millennium', each generation manages to find something in his work that is relevant to the concerns of the moment. This will continue to create problems. Churchill the politician living is his own time is now imprisoned by his relevance to our times and our desire to interpret him with this in mind. In this respect, the debate over his attitude to Britain and a federal Europe is the current preoccupation for politicians and historians alike (and especially for those who like to try their hand at both professions). The books reviewed here show that there are still many more facets of this most versatile of statesmen to be studied and interpreted. It is not least because he represented different things at different times that the canon of Churchill scholarship continues to attract this extraordinary amount of attention.

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