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Writing about Winston:

Two Works Compared

By Victoria Valusek '10



History records the ebb and flow of the tide of human endeavor and whether there are lessons to be learned depends primarily upon two factors. The first is the honesty, accuracy, and integrity of the person recording. The second is the critical consideration/sensibility of the student. Geoffrey Best (*Churchill: A Study in Greatness*) and Paul Addison (*Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*) have chosen as their subject the life of one of the most prominent political leaders of the modern era. The “ebb and flow” described by both depict Churchill as not so much riding the tide, but, more or less, sloshing around in the surf and despite his efforts at self-destruction Winston Churchill (1874-1965) somehow manages to save himself from drowning – sometimes by sheer will-power, but most often by chance.

The self-destruct mechanism both authors ascribe to Churchill is his egomania. Not content with being a mere observer or reporter of events, Churchill unceasingly tries to interject/project himself into the center of the process. Churchill’s writings such as *The World Crisis* (published in five volumes between 1923 and 1931) and *The Second World War* (published in six volumes between 1948 and 1954) bear out this point. He is not a dispassionate, uncommitted bystander. Rather, he has an agenda to serve up, along with his opinion. He is that person responsible for the direction of the “tide,” and to ignore his counsel and insight would be to put in peril the ship of the state.

Geoffrey Best cites five events in Churchill’s life which he believes are the most pivotal and critical in Churchill’s personal life and political career. Best’s consideration of these points vis-à-vis Paul Addison’s work makes for an interesting comparison chronologically: Clementine Hozier, Gallipoli/Dardanelles, India policy, Prime Minister, his first retirement in 1945.¹ One might argue against these points and say that to use them as the basis for analysis between the two books is unfair to Addison. However, the fact is that the points chosen by Best illustrate an “ebb and flow” from high points to disastrously low points and the cyclical tides of history.

Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill was born on November 30, 1874, to Lord and Lady Randolph.² Lord Randolph was a politician in his own right. He was a

¹ Geoffrey Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness* (London: Hambledon and London, 2001), 270.

² Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 1, 3, & 4; Paul Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7 & 8.

Conservative and one time Chancellor of the Exchequer. However, he never achieved his hope of becoming Prime Minister of England.³ He married Jennie Jerome, daughter of a wealthy American businessman, in April of 1874.⁴ Lord Randolph was not much involved in his son's upbringing, but this did not deter Winston's affection for him.⁵ His father died when Winston was quite young (more on this topic later). In the same year of his father's death, Winston graduated from the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. Following his graduation, he was commissioned to the 4th Hussars, cavalry in 1895.⁶

After a rather short military career spent for the most part playing polo in India, Winston resigned his commission and entered the political arena. In 1900, he was elected to Parliament (House of Commons), for the Conservative seat of Oldham.⁷ However, by 1904, he had deserted the Conservatives and "crossed the floor," declaring himself for the Liberals.⁸ With this action, his reputation as an "opportunist" was sealed. He did not keep the faith and thus, he would never be considered a "sound party man."⁹

To this political faithlessness there was a counterbalance in his private life: his marriage to Clementine Hozier in September 1908. Although Winston ignored her counsel at his own loss, Clementine was a supportive, steadying influence on him. Best notes that Winston was always faithful to Clementine.¹⁰ Addison, on the other hand, while initially stating that Winston was always committed to Clementine and never wavered from his steadfastness, intimates otherwise at the end of his book.¹¹

Churchill's move to the Liberals in 1904 provided an opportunity for a steady political ascendance: Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies (1905), President of the Board of Trade (1908), Home Secretary (1910), First Lord of the Admiralty (1911)¹². It was in this last position which he held from 1911 to 1915 that Churchill suffered his first major political setback.

As First Lord of the Admiralty (head of the Royal Navy), Churchill embarked on a program of modernization in what could aptly be described as a naval arms race with Germany. Bigger and better battleships were commissioned; equipment and performance improved and a substantial change in personnel practices were instituted.¹³ While Churchill "enormously enjoyed his time in the Admiralty," he was not wholly committed to preserving the traditions of the Navy which (according to Best) he said were founded on "Nelson, rum, buggery, and the lash."¹⁴ Addison reports that Churchill claimed never to have said as much, but "wished he had."¹⁵

By the time the nations of Europe and England felt sufficiently armed to destroy each other in 1914, the Royal Navy had been restored to prominence by Churchill. However, the German navy was ready for the challenge. As the war progressed Churchill

³ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 4; Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 10.

⁴ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 4 & 5; Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 9.

⁵ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 4.

⁶ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 9.

⁷ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 19; Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 25.

⁸ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 21.

⁹ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 22.; Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 34.

¹⁰ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 29 & 270.

¹¹ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 244.

¹² Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 291.

¹³ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 59-61; Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 44-45.

¹⁴ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 45 & 57.

¹⁵ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 59.

became “enthralled by all aspects of fighting.”¹⁶ Not satisfied with managing the operations of the Royal Navy, Churchill attempted to assume military command of Army operations in Antwerp/Ostend, Belgium.¹⁷ In what Best graciously describes as one of the most “extraordinary communications” by a cabinet member, Churchill offered to resign as First Lord and assume command of the land battle in Belgium (1914). Churchill was not discouraged when his offer was not accepted. He later wrote in his book, *The World Crisis*, that his operations in Belgium had saved the British expeditionary force from disaster.¹⁸ Addison writes that Antwerp “was the moment at which Churchill first became associated with disastrous military adventures.” Churchill’s biggest blunder was yet to come.¹⁹

Britain and its allies, frustrated in their Belgian endeavors, looked for other opportunities to continue the battle. The Turkish peninsula Gallipoli and the Dardanelles passage (from the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara then through to the Black Sea) were decided upon as points of attack since in November of 1914 Turkey had entered the war on Germany’s side. Beginning with a successful naval bombardment at Gallipoli and then an unsuccessful land attack, enthusiasm and responsibility for the plan began to falter.²⁰ Churchill was persistent in his efforts to bring the campaign to a successful conclusion, but when the smoke cleared and the British forces soundly defeated, there was only one man left standing to take the blame: Churchill (May 15, 1915). Churchill was removed from his position at the Admiralty and given the “semi-sinecure Chancellorship of the Duchy of Lancaster.”²¹ Best assesses Churchill’s responsibility in the Gallipoli/Dardanelles event as “no greater than the portions of others involved.”²² Addison however, provides another explanation of this event. Although he begins by saying that “it was certainly unfair” that all of the blame was placed on Churchill, Addison ends by stating that the failure of the Gallipoli/Dardanelles campaign really was Churchill’s fault:

Churchill’s own egotism and impetuosity were factors...He was overconfident of success, trumpeting victory in advance and passionately supporting the operation long after most people had written it off. Gallipoli was a cross to which he nailed himself.²³

Politically, Churchill had been severely wounded. He resigned his government office and for the next six months was relatively idle. The appointment to the Chancellorship (Lancaster) left him without any real authority. As he himself described it, “my veins threatened to burst from the fall in pressure.”²⁴ By November 1915, Churchill was serving in France in the British army.²⁵ As Best reports, one writer at the time chronicled (satirically) Churchill’s decision to enter the army as: “Mr. Winston

¹⁶ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 71.

¹⁷ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 54 & 55.

¹⁸ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 56.

¹⁹ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 74.

²⁰ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 76-77.

²¹ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 70.

²² Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 71.

²³ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 80-81.

²⁴ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 72.; Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 82.

²⁵ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 83.

Churchill leaves for the front. Panic among the enemy.”²⁶ Addison, on the other hand, is being less than complimentary when he notes that Lieutenant Colonel Winston Churchill “spent only a hundred days at the front.”²⁷

By May of 1916, Churchill had resigned his position with the Army. December 1916 saw a change in government with David Lloyd George as Prime Minister and Churchill as Minister of Munitions, a non-Cabinet post.²⁸ The war came to an end in November 1918, bringing with it a new hope for peace. Churchill himself was optimistic about his own prospects. He had weathered his worst crisis since coming into politics and felt that “he could look forward to further high office.”²⁹

Elections quickly followed the war’s end, establishing Lloyd George’s coalition’s control. The political tide was rising for Churchill as Lloyd George appointed him Secretary for War and Air.³⁰ Following this, Churchill was appointed Secretary of State for the colonies in 1921. The purview of this secretaryship was virtually the entire British Empire. Until 1922, Churchill labored to keep the Empire intact. When new Parliamentary elections were held however, Churchill found himself out of office.³¹ He would remain out of office until 1924. When he returned to Parliament, he was no longer a Liberal, but a Constitutionalist, a Conservative.³²

Stanley Baldwin, the new Conservative Prime Minister of a Conservative led government (no coalition), offered Churchill the Exchequer’s position in the Cabinet he formed. As the Exchequer, Churchill would acquit himself quite well.³³ Yet, when the Conservatives were defeated by Labor in 1929, the latter formed a coalition with Liberals and Churchill was out of the governing coalition.³⁴

Still, a member of Parliament, Churchill, although minding his duties as representative, had no real influence and so, became a leader of the loyal opposition. Personally, he took time to mend his family’s finances with writing newspaper articles and books and going on a lecture tour in the United States. Politically, his career was at a standstill. There was really no clear direction in which he thought to point himself.³⁵ Once again in the Conservative fold, Churchill was “viewed as vulgar and untrustworthy.”³⁶ Churchill was the self-appointed leader of a small group of Conservatives, “a collection of long-serving but largely inarticulate backbenchers” – the diehard Tories.³⁷ He was their primary spokesman, but they did not hold him in high regard. The primary thrust of the group’s political agenda was in opposition to the India policy being formulated and pursued by the government.³⁸ While as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Churchill was rising on a high tide, his stance on the India policy found him wallowing in the neap tide.

²⁶ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 75.

²⁷ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 84.

²⁸ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 87.

²⁹ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 91.

³⁰ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 92.

³¹ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 98.

³² Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 111.

³³ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 116 -118.

³⁴ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 127-128.

³⁵ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 129.

³⁶ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 142.

³⁷ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 134.

³⁸ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 132-133.

Churchill's regard of India and those in India who wished to be free to govern themselves was at best a condescending paternalism and at its worst, an unconscionable imperialist inspired racism. Churchill did not go out of the way to denigrate those who were not white, but he held many of the prejudices of his contemporaries. Social Darwinism was one such view prevalent at the time claiming to explain and support domination of one group over another as some test of evolutionary process of social development. In particular, Churchill's regard of Gandhi was considered by Indians as nothing short of racism. As both Best and Addison note, Churchill in a February 1931 speech declared: "It is...nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half naked up the steps of the Viceregal Palace, while...conducting a campaign of civil disobedience."³⁹ Haranguing the government about its India policy, using all of his rhetorical powers, Churchill, according to Addison, "looked less like a statesman than a ham actor."⁴⁰ Geoffrey Best describes Churchill's address to the India Empire Society, an anti-India policy group, as "fire-eating."⁴¹ Churchill's opposition to the India policy not only put him in opposition to the government, but also to the leaders of his own party. Thus, to the accusation of warmonger was added "the diehard white supremacy imperialist."⁴² Fortunately, the issue was laid to rest, at least temporarily in 1935, when the Government of India Bill passed and the matter ceased to be a political point of debate.⁴³

Churchill had done much to discredit himself in this matter, but somehow he managed to survive yet another attempt to take his own political life. He had made more enemies than friends in this dreadful showing, but other developments were being introduced upon which he could refocus his energies.⁴⁴ Churchill duly noted the rise of Adolph Hitler. He was also quick to assess the threat of Nazism and the repression and brutality which marked its development and which were two of its chief characteristics. As in 1911, Churchill campaigned vigorously for rearmament and military preparedness. He was invited to serve on the Air Defense Committee in 1935.⁴⁵ The ever increasing aggression exhibited by Hitler and his Nazi Party made Churchill's apocalyptic warnings that much more believable. "[I]n public and private he expressed grave forebodings about the growing might of Germany."⁴⁶

In 1938, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and his conservative party allowed Germany to overrun Czechoslovakia. Although Churchill had approved and agreed with Chamberlain's conservative party when it came into control in 1937, Chamberlain's actions at Munich "opened up a chasm between [himself] and Churchill."⁴⁷ For Churchill, the Munich agreement was "a dishonorable defeat." As Best writes, Churchill warned that the agreement was "only the first slip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup which

³⁹ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 135.; Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 133.

⁴⁰ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 134.

⁴¹ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 135.

⁴² Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 136.

⁴³ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 139.

⁴⁴ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 140-141.

⁴⁵ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 142-143.

⁴⁶ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 144.

⁴⁷ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 147-148 & 150.

will be proffered to us year after year unless...we arise again and take our stand for freedom."⁴⁸

In September 1939 with England at war with Germany, Chamberlain asked Churchill to serve in his cabinet as First Lord of the Admiralty. Churchill threw himself into this assignment with all the enthusiasm he had when he first held the position in 1911, but at this point in time, he was sixty-five years old.⁴⁹

There was at this time a change "in opposition to Churchill within the political elite."⁵⁰ In April 1940, Chamberlain extended Churchill's involvement in war planning and direction when he asked him to take charge of the Military Coordination Committee. Pressure was mounting on Chamberlain and his government to produce some positive results. When there was a set back involving an operation in Norway, Chamberlain was blamed and there was mention that this was Churchill's second Gallipoli.⁵¹ However, the political tides had changed for Churchill. Chamberlain's coalition fell apart as its members lost confidence in Chamberlain.

On May 10, 1945, Churchill found himself Prime Minister of England. Although some government members were wary of his appointment, Churchill approached his position with confidence: "I felt as though I were walking with destiny and that all my past life has been a preparation for this hour and for this time...I was sure I should not fail."⁵² Throughout his premiership which lasted until 1945, Churchill vigorously pursued the war, exercising a great deal of authority over the wartime administration. From his staff and the officials of various government committees, he demanded efficiency and clear communications. He wanted to be kept up-to-date on the progress of the war at the fronts as well as all other pertinent information such as intelligence and technology reports. The relentless work schedule he implemented was intense. Although, as Addison describes it, Churchill, at times was "a hard taskmaster and a bully," he was never "a despot" and thus, "the machinery for the conduct of the war...proved highly successful."⁵³ Best likewise states that Churchill's handling of the "national war machine," although harsh in some aspects, "overall and in the long run did much more good than harm."⁵⁴

In international affairs, Prime Minister Churchill also took a direct and active part. Instead of sending a representative in his place, Churchill attended to diplomatic missions himself. As Addison writes, Churchill traveled so often because of his "desire to be at the scene of the action."⁵⁵ In a similar way, Best notes that Churchill traveled to the areas of "dramatic significance" as they appeared necessary.⁵⁶

In May 1945, as the war in Europe came to an end, Churchill was faced with an impending general election. Held in July of that year, the general election resulted in a major victory for the Labor Party as British society sought a new direction in peacetime. With the Conservatives defeated, Churchill, who by this time was seventy years old,

⁴⁸ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 157.

⁴⁹ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 159-160.

⁵⁰ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 158.

⁵¹ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 160.

⁵² Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 166; Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 161.

⁵³ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 173-175.

⁵⁴ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 177-178.

⁵⁵ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 203.

⁵⁶ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 191.

resigned his position as Prime Minister. This “retirement” marked the fifth major turning point in Churchill’s life.⁵⁷

Although initially very distressed by the defeat, Churchill eventually pulled himself together. During the next six years, he served as the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament.⁵⁸ In this role, he focused on establishing a successful international order.⁵⁹ He thus involved himself in the movement for a united Europe and the campaign against the further spread of Soviet Communism.⁶⁰ As Addison writes, in these six years Churchill was able “to adopt an Olympian role as an elder statesman.”⁶¹ Best also points this out: “The achievement of these years was considerable. His continuing activity as a statesman with international expertise, respect, and celebrity made him a unique global personality.”⁶²

Geoffrey Best’s presentation of Winston Churchill is probably the more even handed and fairer of the two books examined in this paper. His criticisms are well thought-out and overall, the academic import of this writing makes it a serious resource for historians, and even casual readers. On the other hand, Addison’s book falls to a completely different area despite the same subject. As is the case with almost any biography, there are positives and negatives to be considered and then written about. Following this line of thinking, one would expect some kind of balance to be struck between these positives and the negatives. Yet, in his book on Churchill, Addison weighs too far to the negative – to the point that one feels that he/she is reading a celebrity gossip column. There is (hopefully) no doubt that all of the negative remarks about Churchill reported by Addison were uttered or written. However, to collect such bitter and at times offensive observations is just not in good taste, at least not for a writer of Addison’s reputation. Not only has he written several essays on Churchill, but he has also published a book titled *Churchill on the Homefront* (1992).⁶³

Another complaint regarding Addison’s work is accuracy. Some factual data is hard to find and confirm for historians. However, the date of Lord Randolph’s Churchill’s death does not fall into that category. Early on in his book, Addison states that Winston’s father died on January 24, 1886.⁶⁴ While January 24th is indeed the day that Lord Randolph died, the year that Addison supplies is far off the mark. Lord Randolph actually died in 1895. Additionally, Addison later remarks that Winston Churchill’s death was “sixty years to the day after the death of Lord Randolph.”⁶⁵ Winston Churchill died on January 24, 1965.⁶⁶ This is neither a publisher’s error nor an editor’s oversight. Rather, it is just not good work.

In the end, these two books, Best’s *Churchill: A Study in Greatness* and Addison’s *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, present the life story of Winston Churchill in different ways. In Best’s book, the reader sees the person of Churchill around whom

⁵⁷ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 270.

⁵⁸ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 301; Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 217.

⁵⁹ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 275.

⁶⁰ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 221-222 & 228-229.

⁶¹ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 217.

⁶² Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 272.

⁶³ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 338, 340, & 359.

⁶⁴ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 13.

⁶⁵ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 244.

⁶⁶ Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness*, 325.

the events of history unfold and Churchill's sometimes vain attempts to have an effect thereupon. In Addison, Churchill is a little man "with feet of clay" at the periphery of events, his egotism driving him into every passing action – he is alternately victorious or miserably failing.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Addison, *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*, 254.

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