

VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2019

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Book Review by Larry P. Arnn

MAN OF THE CENTURY

Churchill: Walking with Destiny, by Andrew Roberts.
Viking, 1,152 pages, \$40



THE MASS OF BOOKS ABOUT WINSTON Churchill can be moved about only like armored divisions on ocean freighters. Nearing completion of the final volume of documents to be published by Hillsdale College in the official biography of Sir Winston, I am guilty myself of adding to the tonnage. The final one is volume 23 of the documents, to which must be added the biography's eight heavy narrative volumes! Anyone connected with that project must be proud but also a little conscience stricken.

Andrew Roberts is the latest culprit, and he too is well aware of the problem. He begins the final chapter of *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* with his subject's admission: "Far too much has been and is being written about me." This quotation is from the 1920s, decades before Churchill died, almost a century before this book! Even Churchill could have had little idea what was coming.

What can justify this book? A historian to the core, Roberts answers that only now have the last sources become available, chiefly the diaries of King George VI, Soviet ambassador to Britain Ivan Maisky, and Churchill's children. Also recently opened are the verbatim reports of the War Cabinet meetings. Those and other new items are put to good use here.

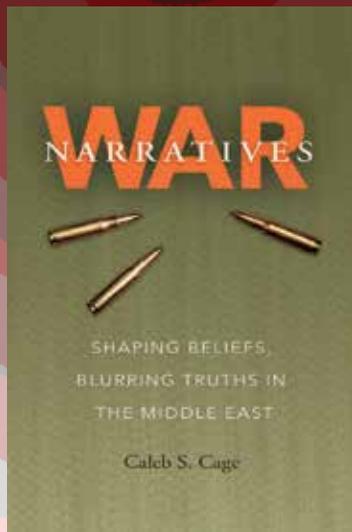
BUT THAT IS NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT thing. The real justification is that this book is excellent, and there is always room for more of that. This is the best biography of Winston Churchill written since 1991, when Sir Martin Gilbert published his one-volume *Churchill: A Life*. It has the adventure, energy, and incessant movement that Churchill produced. It is witty, fluent, and precise, in rhythm with the material. It gallops across decades and through the largest episodes in history. Not even William Man-

chester, who made mistakes and did not finish, has had so much fun writing about Churchill.

Roberts's own life has been a kind of preparation for the trial of writing this book. With studies like *Eminent Churchillians* (1994), *Hitler and Churchill* (2003), and *Masters and Commanders* (2008), he has been moving nearer Churchill for decades in what now seems a strategy of envelopment. His very first book was *Holy Fox* (1991), a biography of Edward Wood, first Earl of Halifax, one of Churchill's closest colleagues and opponents. Halifax was associated with Neville Chamberlain in the policy of appeasement; Churchill was their leading opponent. Viceroy of India when Gandhi became the leader of the Congress Party, Halifax made concessions to Gandhi that Churchill opposed. On May 10, 1940, Halifax and Churchill sat in a room with Chamberlain to decide which of them would become prime minister. When in late May 1940 the British Cabinet decided to



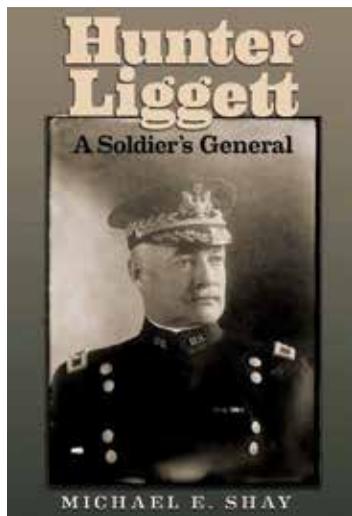
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rebuff an appeal through Mussolini for parley with Hitler, Halifax was the man who brought the offer and for an anxious time suggested its acceptance. Halifax was later Churchill's ambassador to Washington, where all hope resided. These are fateful stories in history and in the life of Churchill, and Andrew studied them for a long time and from another point of view before he began work on the great man himself.

Also Roberts has his own special relationship with America, of which Churchill was half a son, and to which he looked more than once to save the world. Andrew has lived here, and he is the son of the franchisee of Kentucky Fried Chicken in the United Kingdom. If you can make an informed choice between original and extra crispy, you have learned America.

ROBERTS HAS PRODUCED A COMPLETE picture of Churchill. He knows not only what he did and said, but the same about others. It is no easy thing to put his many words and deeds in any kind of order; to set them in their environment is masterly. The new book is divided into two parts: preparation and trial. This gives direction to a story that sprawls across continents and decades. It is appropriate, for Churchill was purposeful from early days. He intended to be a savior of his people, and therefore he conceived his early life as a preparation for that. The trial came, of course, in those cataclysmic events that caused, and were caused by, the great world wars in which he was a central figure.

Roberts finds many curious, delightful, and informative things that make the book a pleasure. Did you know, for example, that Churchill in his youth was always falling down? Did you know that his fallings-down might have saved his life at age 23 in a cavalry charge at the battle of Omdurman, where he wielded a pistol and not a saber because of an injured shoulder? Did you know that especially as a boy he left a trail of lost or broken valuables in his wake? The young Churchill was in a hurry. As he aged, he did not slow down so much as he got better at handling the speed.

Did you know that Churchill voted for women's suffrage the first time it came up in 1904, but then he resisted it for years because suffragettes would disrupt his meetings with violent acts, including upon him? Churchill, Roberts observes, was never given to retreat in the face of aggression. Only when all that subsided did he return to his original position.

Did you know that the government was watching Churchill during his wilderness years, when he fought nearly alone against

appeasement? MI5, whose ancestor, the Secret Service Bureau, Churchill had helped to found, tapped his telephone in 1935 (shades of today). He developed many sources of information in the civil service, the military, and from abroad about British and German war preparations. Some of those sources were pressed in ugly ways to break relations with Churchill. In times like those, as in times like these, politics can be dirty.

IN CONTRAST IS THE OFTEN FINE BEHAVIOR of Clement Attlee, the first socialist prime minister, and the victor over Churchill in the 1945 election, which brought socialism to Britain. He was also one of the last men to be evacuated in the failed Dardanelles offensive of 1915-16. This campaign was Churchill's political Armageddon. It cost him his job at the Admiralty. It was the ground of taunts and mistrust of him for decades. Veteran of the campaign and leader of the opposing party, Attlee might have made more hay with this than anyone. It turns out that he believed in the campaign and formed a high opinion of Churchill as a strategic thinker. That helps explain why Churchill, who tried to keep his personal relations with opponents friendly, was so very friendly with Attlee, who was his deputy prime minister during World War II. Mostly at loggerheads in domestic policy, they cooperated in foreign policy for the rest of their careers.

Did you know that most of the appeasers, who built their case in part on the horrors of World War I, had not done military service in that war, but most of the anti-appeasers had distinguished records there? The ones who knew war firsthand seemed to be both cooler in facing the danger of it and wiser in their efforts to prevent it.

Did you know that Roger Keyes, the daring naval commander whom Churchill promoted during the Great War, was also present at the Dardanelles? Deputy commander of the naval forces, he, like Attlee, believed in the strategy and wanted to continue the fight when the commanding admiral called it off. Keyes might have supplied the stitch in time. Later, this same Keyes was a Conservative member of Parliament and one of Churchill's leading supporters. He struck one of the blows in Parliament that caused Neville Chamberlain to resign in May 1940. On the other hand, he supported a motion in July 1942 to force Churchill to resign as minister of defense and remain prime minister only. When Churchill said the House may take all of his jobs but not one of them, Keyes withdrew his support for the motion, which then collapsed.

WHEN HISTORY IS WRITTEN AS ROBERTS writes it, one learns that the world may be big, but also small. To see how these relationships persist and change through time and circumstance teaches something about the way the world works.

Sometimes Roberts finds reasons to criticize Churchill that sting in their justice. Did you know that he suppressed quotations or altered them without disclosure in writing the biography of his father? Did you know that he did this in an immediate political context that would advance his own career and help to establish further his own importance? This was the young Churchill, and Roberts's judgment about this episode is balanced. Churchill did truly love his father and did seek to follow in his footsteps throughout his life. One may forgive a young man such things even while admitting that he is wrong. A fellow must start somewhere, and there are much worse places to start than with one's father.

Roberts does a service, too, in correcting no fewer than four of the worst myths about Churchill: that he was frequently drunk or even alcoholic; that he suffered from recurring depression; that he helped to found a European Union of the type we have today and with Britain as a member; and that he is responsible for genocide in India. Carefully researching each question and marshalling the evidence, Roberts wipes the stains of these charges from Churchill's character.

Alcohol, Churchill wrote, is like war: it exhilarates when sipped and makes comatose when taken in quantity. He may have said once, and only once, that he had "black dogs" of depression, but Roberts points out that he never missed a day of work from depression or alcohol. Of the precursor to the E.U., he quotes Churchill that it was never intended to be a government over anyone, let alone of Britain. And surprising though it may seem, the chief culprits in the Bengal famine were the Japanese, who conquered the bread baskets of India in aggressive war and threatened the sea lanes around India. Although there was a war on, and both food and shipping were desperately short, Churchill and the War Cabinet found hundreds of thousands of tons of food during the famine. Alas, it was not enough.

Any biography must be judged chiefly by how it tells the pivotal parts of the story. For Churchill, that would be 1940. In that year the affairs of the world came to an inflection point at the place where Churchill stood. Partly he thrust himself there. Partly he was carried there by the force of his eloquence, the war providing the occasion for its full use. Partly it was the good fortune that there was no one else except Halifax, and he was

reluctant. And once in command, Churchill accomplished things that made both friends and enemies marvel.

This is the place in Churchill's life that best demonstrates what was to him, I would argue, the vital thing: "the profound significance of human choice, and the sublime responsibility of men." In those rooms and on those days one can see that the world would be different without Winston Churchill. Some may think *worse*, but all must think *different*. The demonstration of that is by itself a refutation of the view of the totalitarians, that trends, not choices, are what matter.

ROBERTS'S TELLING OF THE STORY HAS the best features of a history book and of a novel. He moves nimbly between scenes and sources. At one moment we are in the Cabinet Room, next the House of Commons, next the somber halls of the collapsing French government. We visit with the king and Churchill, and we know the conversation from the king's diaries. We watch Churchill maneuver politically to win the hearts of the appeasers, still the strongest force in the Conservative Party, or to neutralize those he could not. It is delicious to read of Churchill, not generally vindictive, ordering civil servant and appeaser Horace Wilson out of his office by 2 p.m., of him denying his request for more time, and of Brendan Bracken and Randolph Churchill piling Wilson's things into the corridor. When Wilson returns from lunch, they are smoking cigars in his office.

While these political battles are being fiercely fought, we march alongside the British Army in its desperate retreat down through France and its besiegement at Dunkirk. Through speeches, memoranda, diaries, letters, and recollections, Roberts shows us Churchill's restless search for opportunities to strike; we see him drive his colleagues to activities of which they had not thought themselves capable. In fact we see them better than any single eyewitness could have.

Among those anxious days of 1940, the most pivotal came on May 10, when Chamberlain, Halifax, and Churchill met in 10 Downing Street to decide who would be the next prime minister. There are many accounts of this by people in the room or nearby. They are mostly the same but with important differences. Roberts summarizes each of these deftly and compares them. In his telling, the preference of Chamberlain and many others for Halifax is clear. The matter was decided more quickly than Churchill remembered by Halifax's reluctance to take the job. Churchill waited for him to state that reluctance, and then he showed that he was ready.

The scene is the turning point in Churchill's life and one of the key turning points in modern history. He had begun his trial, and the rest of the book recounts his triumph through many setbacks.

NOTHING BETTER ILLUSTRATES THE command Roberts has of his subject than the conclusion of the book, which provides a map for the book and for Churchill's life. It is also chiefly here that he gives his account of the larger purposes of Churchill's life. This is a difficult undertaking, and Roberts is among the best qualified for it.

Churchill, he says, was a great man and benignant. He says that although Churchill's judgment was often doubted (in some cases by Roberts himself), he surpassed his detractors and nearly everyone else on the three largest issues, "the Prussian militarists in 1914, the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s, and Soviet communism after the Second World War."

Roberts shows us a Churchill of greatness but also of contradictions. He shows us a man who is overbearing, self-centered, passionate, hasty, given to exaggeration—or rather, committed to it. He shows us an aristocrat, who thought lower classes and (about this Roberts's account seems ambiguous) non-whites inferior. He shows us a "paternalist," who thought it his duty and his station to protect and improve those below him. He shows us a man who does not believe in God, or anyway in any revealed God. This non-believer believed rather in something else: his creed was the British empire. He shows us a progressive who believed in the inevitable rise and superiority of that empire. Immediately after a 1952 quote from Churchill about the "undying genius" of the British, Roberts writes that Churchill grew up in a world of "[b]iological racism—the Social Darwinian belief that mankind is organized hierarchically by race, with the whites at the top."

Roberts shows us a better Churchill, too: a man who made friendships across the classes and had no snobbery; who was prudent, kind, careful, courageous, truthful, and, on big things, wise; who was magnanimous, a word from the ancient world denoting the sum of all the virtues. Still, Roberts shows us an "uncomfortable truth": "that Churchill's lifelong belief in the superiority of the British people over all others ultimately served the cause of democracy well."

I confess that I doubt most of the negative things cited above even as I know—and behold in Roberts's book—the evidence for them. But what does that evidence establish?

Here is an example. Roberts reports what Churchill identified as the cause of the Boer war: "the abiding fear and hatred of the move-



ment that seeks to place the native on a level with the white man." Roberts comments: "Churchill had no sympathy for the aggressive white supremacism of the Afrikaner, from which his own paternalistic instincts are entirely different".

Here Churchill is making a point about human equality. Roberts is making a point about paternalism, which I take to mean treating people as if you were their father. Fathers are superior to children because children are immature, but children are not raised in the same way as puppies. Children grow up to be adults, the equal of their parents. Until they do, they do not have the same vote in the family that fathers and mothers have. Puppies, even as dogs, never attain it.

I THINK ROBERTS MEANS THAT CHURCHILL thought of the people of color in the empire as children, which Churchill says several times. This may be a fault, but it is not the same thing as regarding them as puppies or beasts, who can never grow into human beings. But then why does Roberts mention "biological racism" apparently to explain or expiate the shock of Churchill's statement about "undying genius" in 1952?

This question is important because it is central to the issues raised by Churchill's career. He confronted the great totalitarians and their doctrines of historical necessity and dominance and hatred based on class and race. He acted in vindication of "the profound significance of human choice and the sublime responsibility of men."

It is not entirely clear what Roberts thinks about this. I expect he wishes it that way, and in any case he does what he must do: gives us evidence on both sides of the question. For example, he makes the point

that often when Churchill says "races," he means "peoples." People are created equal, but "peoples" develop and grow or decline and diminish. Through their beliefs and ways of living, they may develop a "genius" or a demon. Maybe one day all the world will be free, but so far, much of it is not. Even among a race or people with a demon, the people in it carry in their nature the entitlement to be free. Churchill applies this idea generally, including to the people of India.

To support my doubts, I point to an essay from which Roberts ably quotes, "Fifty Years Hence," written in 1932. Here Churchill rejects explicitly the idea that human evolution is decisive. He imagines a time "millions of years" in the future when "a race of beings was evolved" that had mastered nature and could live as long as they chose. They could travel among the planets. They could know both the past and the future. Is that not appealing, and not so different from the dreams of Hitler and Stalin? Churchill continues:

But what was the good of all that to them? What did they know more than we know about the answers to the simple questions which man has asked since the earliest dawn of reason—"Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Whither are we going?" No material progress, even though it takes shapes we cannot now conceive, or however it may expand the faculties of man, can bring comfort to his soul. It is this fact, more wonderful than any that Science can reveal, which gives the best hope that all will be well.

Here, the mature Churchill mentions progress and evolution, but he argues in the opposite way of the Whig historians he read as a

young man. He argues an eternal problem and a calling to answer it. He derives the rights of man from this problem and calling. In a question, he says, one may find a certainty. I believe that is the certainty upon which Churchill saw Hitler for the evil that he was; also, Stalin; also, socialism in its complete and necessarily despotic form. Although he was larger and higher than most anyone, Churchill could not see everything at once. He had to learn and prepare.

THESE QUESTIONS ARE MORE THAN important, they are central, but they do not form any reproach against this book, which is a sterling exercise of character as well as intellect. It is devoid of the smug second guessing that we all may commit, especially when writing history. It is the product of a massive and faithful labor. It tells the story of a wonderful life with accuracy and dash, with richness and comprehension. It raises all the questions and provides the material for their contemplation.

The achievement of the book is epitomized in its beautiful concluding words.

With enough spirit, [Churchill] believed that we can rise above anything, and create something truly magnificent of our lives. His hero John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, won great battles and built Blenheim Palace. His other hero, Napoleon, won even more battles and built an empire. Winston Churchill did better than either of them: the battles he won saved Liberty.

Larry P. Arnn is president of Hillsdale College and the author of Churchill's Trial: Winston Churchill and the Salvation of Free Government (Thomas Nelson).

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