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China**

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Troubles**

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Reigns in Spain**

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& Citizens**

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**Goldwater
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Epstein:
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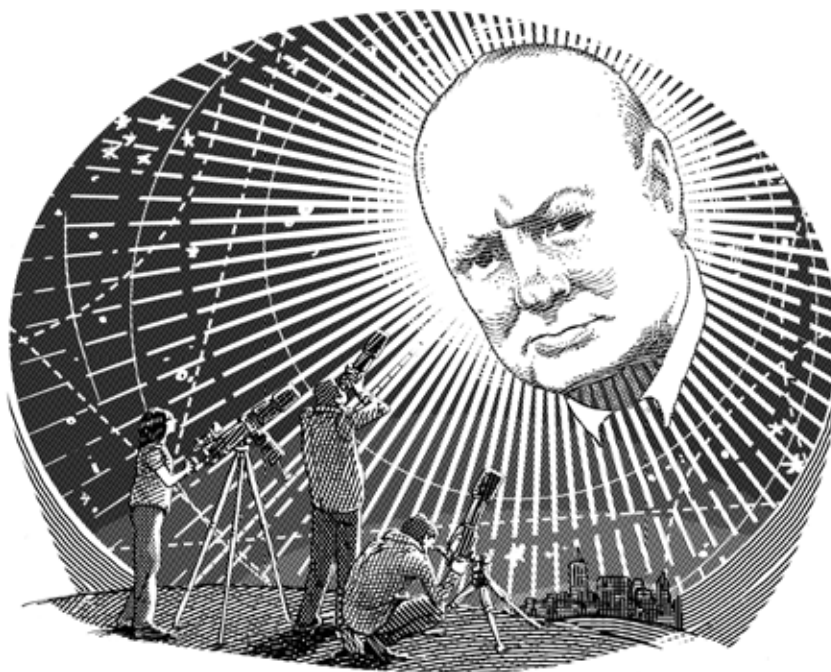
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Book Review by James W. Muller

BECOMING CHURCHILL

A Prelude to Immortality: Winston Churchill's My Early Life, by Gary L. Stiles.
Unicorn, 584 pages, \$52.50



AS HIS DAUGHTER MARY SOAMES OBSERVED, Winston Churchill's literary career was arguably longer than his political career. His first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, appeared in 1898 before he had turned 24, and he wrote four more before taking his seat in the House of Commons in 1901. His writing continued apace for six decades. Though he remained in Parliament until 1964, he gave his final substantive speech in 1955. His last book of speeches before his death, however, *The Unwritten Alliance*, was published in 1961.

From the beginning, Churchill's books were widely read. They supported his political career in many ways. Beginning at a time when parliamentarians received no pay unless they held cabinet office, income from his writings made it possible for him to serve in Parliament without inherited wealth. The discipline of writing helped Churchill cultivate the prudence that made him an exemplary statesman. His reputation arose and grew as readers appreciated his writings.

Churchill was a young man in his twenties serving as a cavalry subaltern in India when he wrote to his mother wondering whether he himself would one day have a biographer. It came to pass a year before Churchill published a two-volume life of his father, Lord Randolph, when Alexander MacCallum Scott—a fellow young Liberal member of parliament

who later worked as Winston's private secretary—published *Winston Spencer Churchill: A Biography* (1905), recounting Churchill's first three decades. That initial biography was followed by dozens of others written during Churchill's lifetime, and hundreds more written afterward, in many languages.

ONE SUCH WORK STANDS OUT AS THE longest book ever written about anyone: the 31-volume official biography begun by Churchill's son, Randolph, who wrote its first two narrative volumes before he died in 1968. Six more narrative volumes were written by Martin Gilbert, who had worked as Randolph's research assistant responsible for compiling companion volumes of supporting documents. For many years afterward, Gilbert continued to work on the documentary volumes, eventually publishing 16 of them.

Gilbert was unable to finish the 17th such volume, which begins partway through the Second World War. His former research assistant, Larry Arnn—a founder and future president of the Claremont Institute—completed it. After Gilbert's death, Arnn, by then president of Hillsdale College, saved the biography from expiring unfinished. With help from the eminent Churchill scholar Richard Langworth and a team of researchers, he prepared and published half a dozen more document volumes, amounting to 23 in all, and

arranged to reprint the earlier out-of-print volumes.

This official biography is indispensable for serious study of Churchill and his times. For those who can't give up a year of their lives to read it, there are good choices in a single volume, especially *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (2018) by Andrew Roberts, who has done yeoman work battling Churchill's detractors on the far left and the far right.

Yet for all their dependence on Churchill's own books, most biographers treat them superficially. For those who lived through World War II, his words, no matter how memorable, were often eclipsed by his actions—especially his success in putting together the alliance that won the war. Biographers who plunder Churchill's books to borrow apt phrases from him rarely read them carefully enough to understand why he wrote them, attributing his literary output to his chronic need for income, supporting his own positions against political opponents, and keeping his name before the public. Specialized studies of Churchill's writings by Paul Alkon, Keith Aldritt, Daniel J. Mahoney, David Reynolds, Jonathan Rose, and Manfred Weidhorn offer insights into Churchill's motives as an author. But, in general, his own books are overlooked—more quoted than studied.

Randolph Churchill begins his official biography with the "*Theme of the Work*," quot-

ing from John Gibson Lockhart's biography of Sir Walter Scott: "He shall be his own biographer." Randolph followed the same practice, building a voluminous biography on his father's words and writings. Many of Churchill's books are autobiographical, at least in part. Not only his son, but every previous and subsequent biographer has been drawn to Churchill's own writings about his life, quoting or paraphrasing or criticizing them to fashion the statesman's story. Churchill encouraged this approach when he urged "all Parties" in the House of Commons in 1948, after the war, to "leave the past to history, especially as I propose to write that history myself." He subsequently provided six volumes of World War II memoirs.

Today, more than 80 years after that war's end, people are more likely to be fascinated by a Churchill *bon mot* or something they have read about him or encountered on social media than by their own memories of his speeches or actions as wartime prime minister. So, when people ask which book to read about Churchill, I always urge them to read Churchill's own books first.

IN 1930, AFTER HIS CONSERVATIVE PARTY lost an election the previous year and he was obliged to step down as chancellor of the exchequer, Churchill published a memoir, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission*. The book was not a full autobiography, since it told the story of his life only from his earliest memories in Ireland in the 1870s to his marriage in 1908. But, if it is only a partial autobiography, it is wholly autobiographical, unlike many of his other books that include only some autobiographical passages.

My Early Life has never been out of print and has been translated into more than two dozen languages. It was among the books cited by the Swedish Academy to justify Churchill's Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953. It is now the focus of *A Prelude to Immortality*, a new book by Gary L. Stiles, an indefatigable collector of Churchill's writings, photographs, and other elements of what has come to be called Churchilliana, who earlier published a comprehensive collection of Churchill cartoons in *Punch*.

Churchill's political fortunes were subject to the vagaries of public opinion, leading him to switch political parties twice and subjecting him to political reverses that three times deprived him of high office and disrupted his path to becoming prime minister: in the midst of the First World War, during a recession, and throughout the 1930s until the outbreak of World War II. I leave aside the later insult of being obliged to step down as prime minister after leading the nation to victory over Nazi Germany, even before the war was over. In

Churchill: A Study in Failure, 1900–1939 (1970), Robert Rhodes James argued that, until his return to the Admiralty in 1939, one might well have concluded that Churchill was finished and would have to be considered—as Churchill had written of former viceroy to India and foreign secretary George Nathaniel Curzon in *Great Contemporaries*—a man who had "failed to achieve the central purpose of his life."

Churchill remarks in *My Early Life* that, although he did not enjoy his time at Harrow School, many of his classmates "found in its classrooms and upon its playing-fields the greatest distinction they have ever known in life." As his essay on Curzon (who excelled at Eton) makes clear, that was very much Curzon's trajectory. Stiles suggests by his title that, if Rhodes James was right that Churchill had not attained worldly immortality before he became prime minister, he already deserved it, knew he deserved it, and showed discerning readers why he deserved it by writing *My Early Life* as a *prelude* to the worldly immortality he expected to attain, and finally did attain, a decade later. (As for real immortality, Churchill was diffident, remarking that, though he was always ready to meet his Maker and looked forward to the brighter colors he expected to find in heaven, he was not so sure his Maker was ready to meet him.)

STILES UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE of Churchill's presentation of *My Early Life* "to a new generation." He remarks on the connection of that dedication to Churchill's exhortation at the end of the fourth chapter (which Stiles's introduction misplaces "in Chapter 3") to "young men, all over the world," never to "submit to failure," nor to "be fobbed off with mere personal success or acceptance." Stiles draws attention to Churchill's endeavor "to show the point of view appropriate to my years, whether as a child, a schoolboy, a cadet, a subaltern, a war-correspondent, or a youthful politician," which adds verisimilitude to Churchill's story and candidly shows the reader how his experience and comprehension of the world increased as he grew up.

Nor does Stiles ignore the twin revolutions of science and democracy that, Churchill explains, came peaceably over Britain between his youth and his middle age, making *My Early Life* "a picture of a vanished age." Stiles also recognizes the violent turning point between the two eras, the Great War, after which young people seemed to Churchill to drift, having lost the appetite for youthful endeavor and a sense of obligation to the world. Churchill disapproved of many of these changes, but Stiles argues that he did not let a romantic attachment to the past make him shrink from adapting to them. Finally, he notes that Churchill ends

My Early Life with his marriage—the proper conclusion of a man's youth, the significance of which many commentators miss.

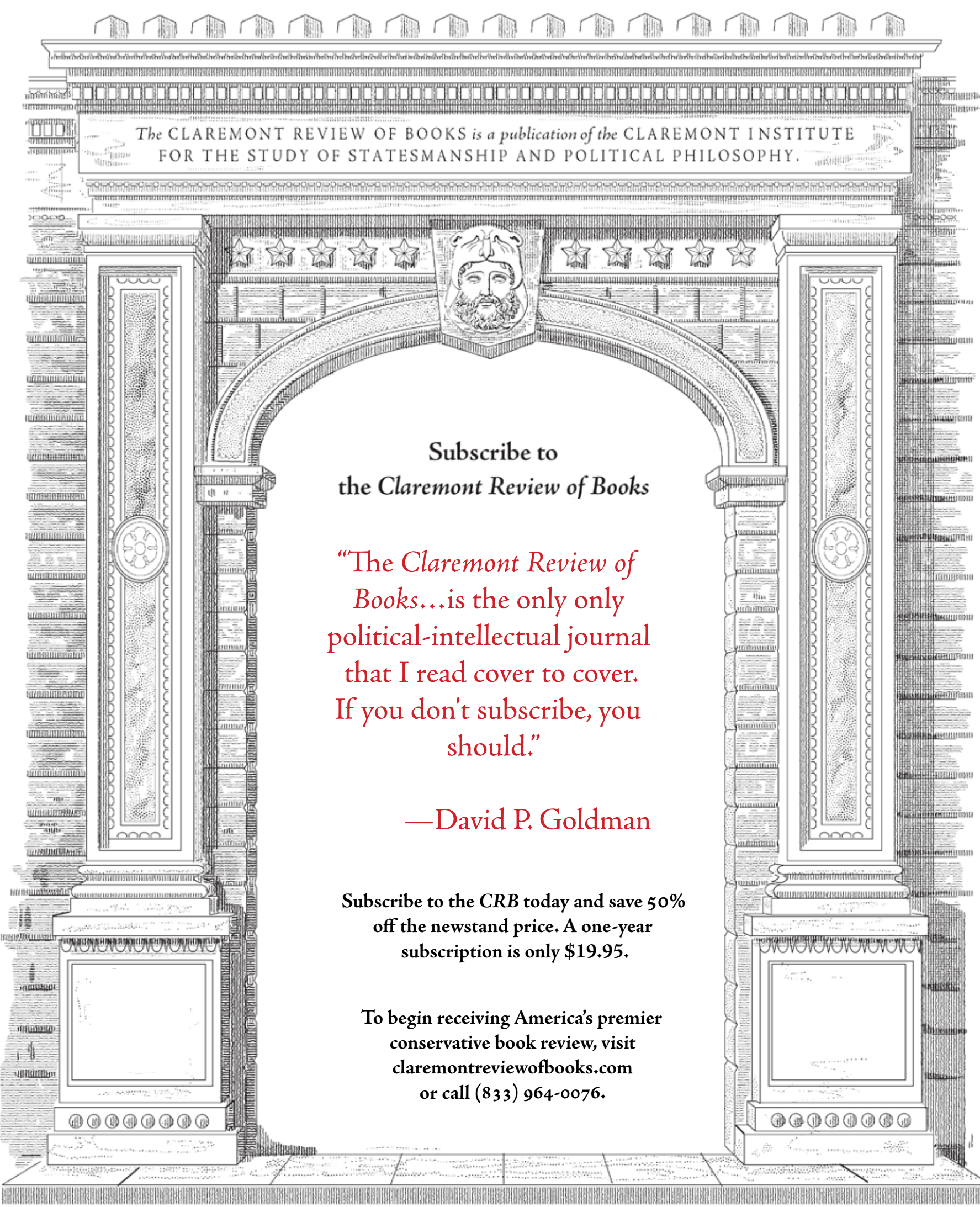
Although thoughtful readers of *My Early Life* will be familiar with most of these characteristics of the memoir, they might be surprised at how many conventional academic writers are oblivious of them. Such critics mistake Churchill for an unrepentant Victorian and an uncritical defender of British imperialism. Even more disappointing, they miss the fun of encountering Churchill's rueful, self-deprecating humor.

A PRELUDE TO IMMORTALITY IS NOT limited to interpreting *My Early Life*. One of its most valuable and original parts is Stiles's exploration of the genesis of Churchill's memoir. Drawing on papers in the Churchill Archives Centre at Churchill College, Cambridge, Stiles traces its origins in Churchill's previous writings, especially his early books on Queen Victoria's "little wars" in which he participated as a cavalry subaltern and a war correspondent—on the northwest frontier of India in *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, fighting dervishes in the Sudan in *The River War* (1899), in the Boer War in both *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* (1900) and *Ian Hamilton's March* (1900), and shorter articles on his youthful adventures published after those books appeared.

Stiles reproduces numerous passages from these writings, comparing them to what the mature Churchill wrote in *My Early Life*, which should inspire readers to track down the original sources and consider how Churchill's understanding of the events of his youth developed over time. Stiles has also made a thorough search for translations and editions of *My Early Life*, as well as works in which the book has been quoted or excerpted, finding instances that escaped even the vigilant eye of Ronald Cohen when he wrote his three-volume *Bibliography of the Writings of Sir Winston Churchill* (2006), treating the reader to new discoveries about the worldwide influence of Churchill's memoir. He includes a bibliography of book reviews of *My Early Life* that, together with references to other sources throughout the book, attests to his diligence in investigating every aspect of Churchill's memoir.

Gary Stiles's *A Prelude to Immortality* is a substantial book and a handsome one. Everyone who reads it will discover something he did not know before.

James W. Muller is professor emeritus of political science at the University of Alaska, Anchorage; chairman of the board of academic advisers of the International Churchill Society; and editor of Winston S. Churchill's My Early Life: A Roving Commission (St. Augustine's Press).



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—David P. Goldman

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