
'And some have greatness thrust upon them'

Roy Jenkins: *Churchill* (Macmillan, 2001 hbk, 2002 pbk; pp1002)

Reviewed by **Sam Crooks**

In the view of Roy Jenkins, that of many others, and certainly his own, Winston Churchill was a great man. Jenkins goes so far as to say that he regards him as 'the greatest human being ever to occupy 10 Downing St', edging out Gladstone, his last biographical subject, from that position. At one level this type of ranking is more akin to the authors of *1066 and All That*, but at another it reflects Geoffrey Elton's comment that he inclined 'to judge all historians by their opinion of Winston Churchill: whether they can see that no matter how much better the details – often damaging – of man and career become known he still remains, quite simply, a great man'.

Jenkins is well aware of the 'details' – this is by no means an uncritical biography. He brings few, if any, new facts to Churchill's life, relying mostly on Martin Gilbert, other biographies, diaries, and memoirs, *Hansard*, and Churchill's own publications and articles. But his long experience as a politician give him an empathy both for the political process and for the chances of event and personality that inform the relations between individuals. He is also sensibly non-judgemental about the realities of political life. He logs, for example, Churchill's capacity to change his views on many topics depending on the department that he was running. But why should we expect it to have been any different? is his implicit question – that's what politicians do.

Jenkins treats Churchill's life chronologically. He is particularly good on the Liberal years, where he can draw on his extensive knowledge of the period and his own experience as Home Secretary. Pamela Plowden's acute observation – that 'the first time you meet Winston you

see all his faults, and the rest of your life you spend in discovering his virtues' – is cited to illustrate the bumptiousness and self-regard at this time that so many found unpleasant. Jenkins relates Churchill's astonishing literary output (43 books in 72 years, and an income from his journalism of up to £450,000 *p.a.* at today's prices) with his capacity to argue his case with colleagues through personally authored memoranda much more effectively than they. That output was largely historical; hence the emphasis on the concepts of nation and progress that informed so much of Churchill's thought and speeches. Jenkins places Churchill firmly in the Whig tradition, describing how his interest in social reform – albeit well founded in *noblesse oblige* – persisted throughout Asquith's administration regardless of his departmental responsibilities.

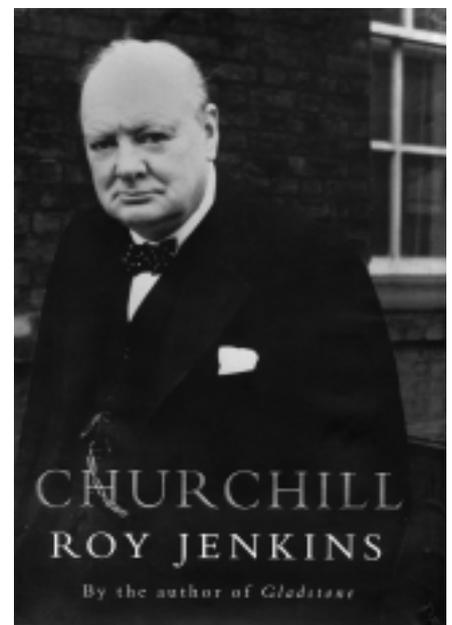
By contrast the book falters in the twenties and thirties. One senses that Jenkins is less at home both with the period and the Conservative Party. He is dutifully critical but less insightful than before of Churchill's support for lost causes such as the Gold Standard, the British Raj and Edward VIII. And he misses the chance to dwell on Churchill as an individual – the thirties in particular are when there is most opportunity to study his hinterland, Chartwell, his bricklaying, a growing family. Although Jenkins reproduces a number of Churchill's best paintings in the photographic section, this is essentially a study of the politician rather than the whole man.

The biography comes to life again with the war. Jenkins deals deftly with Churchill's appointment by a less-than-happy King, and his conduct of the nine war cabinets in late May 1940 when the last possibilities of a negotiated settle-

ment with Hitler were set aside. He is convincing in describing how Churchill must have realised that in resisting Hitler he was consigning the concept of Empire, for which he had fought so hard in the thirties, to the scrapheap – and yet did so unhesitatingly. Possibly over-influenced by Alanbrooke's diaries, Jenkins becomes too involved in the strategic issues surrounding the military conduct of the war, although he does convey well the sense in which after 1942 it ceased to be Churchill's war. El Alamein was the turning point – it was the last purely British victory. That wider – largely American – victory which had become inevitable from 1942 onwards Churchill was to enjoy much less as age and fatigue took their toll.

Surprisingly the power of Churchill's oratory receives less attention than it deserves. Asked what Churchill did to win the war, Clement Atlee replied that he had talked about it. We forget in retrospect that up until the invasion of Russia there was no certainty that Hitler would lose the war, and indeed quite a lot of evidence to the contrary. Yet, in Ed Murrow's words, from 1940 Churchill single-handedly mobilised the English language and sent it to war to persuade the collective will of a nation that defeat was unthinkable and victory inevitable.

The post-war book is disappointing and shows some signs – for example the lists of travel itineraries – of having been written in a hurry. A judgement that



Churchill was the greatest of all prime ministers must surely take into account his peacetime premiership, but Jenkins is sidetracked by the history of the Conservative Party generally and Churchill's fears about the nuclear bomb in particular. Nonetheless an acute discussion of the insensitivity with which Eisenhower and Dulles handled Churchill in 1953 and 1954 is a prelude to Anthony Eden's discomfiture with American policy over Suez two years later.

Throughout, there are some irritations. Churchill attributed to Harrow his appreciation of the structure of the English sentence – 'that noble thing' – and his writing is always colourful, simple and direct. Not so that of Jenkins, whose eloquence has given way to grandiloquence with too many over-long sentences and unhelpful adjectives. There are a number of excursions into by-ways of little importance, such as the reasons for Churchill's first, unusually late, parliamentary oath of allegiance, the mechanics of parliamentary arithmetic, individuals' house purchases close to the King's estates and his relations with his literary agent. Asides about events in which Jenkins played a part do not always illuminate (although interestingly he makes very little reference to his father, who was a parliamentary private secretary in the wartime government). And comparisons with Tony Blair's government today are intrusive.

But the major defect of an otherwise significant book is the lack of an analytical framework for Churchill as a whole. Individual episodes of his life are treated critically and often with insight. There is also a perceptive awareness of the tension between so many of his emotions and his actions – the Anglo-American historian who understood the importance of Europe, the devotee of Empire whose decision to fight rather than negotiate sounded its death-knell, the anti-Communist who was an ally of Stalin, the Whig who joined the Tory party not once but twice.

Yet in his overall judgement Jenkins fails to separate the totality of Churchill's life from those two short years between the fall of France and victory in North Africa on which his place in history rests. What, for example, would have been a biographer's verdict had he

retired at the end of the thirties with no war? Or the view of an Indian biographer on so vehement an opponent of India's independence? Or of Churchill as a journalist, writer and painter had he not also been so prominent a politician?

That said, beside those two short years all else pales. As Jenkins argues,

'Exploding the delusion of protection'

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deep rooted prejudice – an hereditary prejudice I may call it – in their favour. But your power was never got, and you will not keep it, by obstructing the spirit of the age in which you live. If you are found obstructing that progressive spirit which is calculated to knit nations more closely together by commercial intercourse; if you give nothing but opposition to schemes which almost give life and breath to inanimate nature, and which it has been decreed shall go on, then you are no longer a national body.

There is a widely spread suspicion that you have been tampering with the feelings of your tenantry – you may read it in the organ of your party – this is the time to show the people that such a suspicion is groundless. I ask you to go into this committee – I will give you a majority of county members – you shall have a majority of members of the Central Agricultural Protection Association in the committee; and on these terms I ask you to inquire into the causes of the distress of our agricultural population. I trust that neither of those gentlemen who have given notice of

there are times when individuals, through the sheer force of their own will, change history. When it mattered, Churchill – quite simply – was there.

Sam Crooks is Reviews Editor of the Journal of Liberal Democrat History.

amendments will attempt to interfere with me, for I have embraced the substance of their amendments in my motion. I am ready to give those hon. Gentlemen the widest range they please in their inquiries. I only ask that this subject may be fairly investigated. Whether I establish my principle, or you establish yours, good must result from the inquiry; and I do beg and entreat of the honourable, independent country gentlemen in this House, that they will not refuse, on this occasion, to sanction a fair, full and impartial inquiry. (*Loud cheers.*)

Another speech by Richard Cobden, and speeches by many other Liberal orators, are included in the History Group's Great Liberal Speeches – for details see back cover.

- 1 William White, *The Inner Life of the House of Commons*, Reprinted by The Richmond Publishing Co. 1973
- 2 John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, Chapman and Hall 1879
- 3 Jane Ridley, *The Young Disraeli 1804-1846*, Sinclair-Stevenson 1995

News from the History Group

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The History Group has started a new email mailing list, which we will use to send out details of forthcoming meetings and new publications to anyone who wishes to sign up (whether or not they are a member of the Group). This will be your fastest way of finding out about meeting dates and details. If you would like to join the list, log on to our website at www.liberalhistory.org.uk and click on 'want to join our mailing list?' in the navigation bar.

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