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Savior of the West

DANIEL J. MAHONEY

Churchill: A Study in Greatness, by Geoffrey Best (Hambledon, 384 pp., $29.95)

In his remarkable essay “Winston Churchill in 1940,” originally published in The Atlantic Monthly in 1949, Isaiah Berlin paid tribute to Churchill’s greatness. In Berlin’s judgment, Churchill was “the largest human being of our time,” a “gigantic historical figure” whose “work and person will remain the object of scrutiny and judgment to many generations.” This has always been the popular view of Churchill, and remains so especially in the United States, where he is admired by all those still capable of admiration. But Berlin’s judgment was not—and still is not—shared by all of the experts. Berlin records that many of Churchill’s contemporaries took pleasure in dismissing him as an anachronism. They mocked what they saw as his hollow-sounding rhetoric and his “reactionary” preoccupation with politics and war.

But it was precisely Churchill’s old-fashioned engagement with the dramatic aspects of human history that allowed him to articulate perfectly what was at stake in the great conflict between National Socialism and what he did not hesitate to call “liberal and Christian civilization.” Churchill’s magnificent speeches during the Battle of Britain reminded the beleaguered citizens of Great Britain that they were fighting for enduring principles, and allowed them to rise above their mortal selves. In 1940, Churchill and the British people were more than an imperiled tribe defending their island outpost; they revealed to all with eyes to see the nobility of heroic human resistance to tyranny. As prime minister, wrote Berlin, Churchill “was able to impose his imagination and his will upon his countrymen, and enjoy a Periclean reign, precisely because he appeared to be larger and nobler than life and lifted them to an abnormal height in a moment of crisis.”

Berlin’s essay is a powerful expression of the sentiments common among those who lived during the age of Churchill. But most young people growing up in what Geoffrey Best calls “demilitarized” societies have an extremely difficult time connecting with Churchill’s “virtues and victories.” And they are not aided by contemporary historians who too often shun political and military history as elitist and are filled with egalitarian resentment against the very category of human greatness. These critics of traditional political history dogmatically deny that “great men” can shape the course of history.

This is the best first book to read about Churchill.

Seen in this larger context, Best’s splendid new book on Churchill is remarkably countercultural. In the most decisive respects, he picks up where Berlin left off a half-century ago. A distinguished British academic historian who lived through the Battle of Britain as a youth, Best sets out to vindicate the “naive” notion that Churchill was the greatest human being of the age; his approach to history seeks to clarify commonsense judgment, rather than to subvert it in the fashionable academic manner.

Best is rightly convinced that we are much “diminished” if we can no longer appreciate the virtues of a man such as Churchill, and is profoundly aware of the obstacles to such an appreciation. Churchill was an eminently civilized man: a parliamentarian, statesman, writer, painter, and warrior; he therefore appreciated better than we do today that the civic and martial virtues are essential to a well-rounded existence as well as to the health and survival of the democracies. Churchill loved adventure and thrived when standing up to adversity. He was a loving husband and father, and was blessed, in Clementine Churchill, with an unusually devoted and intelligent wife; but he could never be satisfied with a quiet middle-class existence. As a result, he was plagued all his life by accusations that he was a “warmonger.”

Best does a good job of showing just how far off the mark these charges are; but it must be admitted that Churchill’s virtues were not particularly democratic ones.

And we would do well to reflect on that. In an unheroic age, where statesmanship has been replaced by the baubles of administration, it is all too tempting to dismiss Churchill; but that would be a terrible misjudgment. Smug and self-satisfied in our modernity, we still need to reflect on what it means to be whole human beings. And as long as civilization confronts determined, hateful enemies, Churchill will remain our contemporary.

Best has avoided the pernicious tendency of biographers to pile on detail after detail; he never loses track of the big picture or the purpose of his book. As a result, this is the best first book to read about Churchill—preferable in this respect to the indispensable biographical tomes of Sir Martin Gilbert and to the intelligent if less reliable new biography by Roy Jenkins. Best’s greatest strength lies in his intransigent rejection of academic fashion: He is not embarrassed to talk about politics or war and never simply reduces Churchill to his “social context.” Of course, there is some truth to the widespread characterizations of Churchill as a “Victorian Liberal imperialist” or “Edwardian humanitarian”; but only some truth. What is most striking about Churchill, as Best well observes, is his utter singularity. He alone of his generation had a sense of his “star” or destiny. He was distinctive both in his dramatic and imaginative sense of history, and in his unsurpassed rhetorical abilities. He was equally prepared to function and

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flourish as a man of peace and a man of war; he combined humanity and wit with an unparalleled capacity for solemn utterance. This man of action also wrote engrossing and intelligent works of history and political analysis. In 1953, he was even awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. This kind of greatness is irreducible; it cannot be found in some elusive "context."

Best's book is not without its flaws: Like most contemporary academics, he seems to think that ambition is, in and of itself, a moral failing. He laments the fact that Churchill's literary works—for example, his History of the English-Speaking Peoples—are not written in the spirit of academic history; but that is precisely their great charm and merit. And while appreciating Churchill's lucidity about the evil of Communism, he inexplicably shares the widespread view that Churchill was somehow "ob-sessed" because he wished to "strangle Bolshevism in its crib" after the 1917 revolution. In reality, it is hard to quarrel with the wisdom of Churchill's 1949 observation that the failure to have done so would lie heavily on the democracies.

But despite these not inconsiderable defects, Best's book gets the big picture right: In 1940, Churchill's noble rhetoric, with some help from the RAF, sustained the cause of Western liberty when Britain stood alone against the Nazi juggernaut. Over the next five years, he ably directed Britain's military effort in his role as "democratic war-lord." In 1946, at Fulton, Missouri, he warned a tired and complacent America about the threat to liberal values and world peace posed by an aggressive Communist tyranny in charge of the destiny of half of Europe. And at Zurich in September 1946, Churchill had the foresight to promote Franco-German reconciliation as the first step in the creation of a "United States of Europe" (a Europe of which he wished Britain to be a peripheral member). These remarkable successes in the twilight of his life were made possible by a lifetime of action and reflection that prepared him for participation in a monumental drama. That life still inspires, because—despite its limitations—it embodied genuine human greatness.

The Truth Beyond Memory

JOHN J. MILLER

PROFESSOR J. R. R. Tolkien was grading papers on a summer day in 1928 when he came upon a blank page in an exam book. Something inspired him to scribble a few words: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." The whole thing might have ended there, but it was only a beginning. "Names always generate a story in my mind," he explained later. "Eventually I thought I'd better find out what hobbits were like."

By now, millions of readers know what hobbits are like. They're the short, rustic, and unlikely heroes of the 20th century's best-loved book, The Lord of the Rings, as well as The Hobbit, a preceding story written mainly for children. They're about to become even more familiar: New Line Cinema has just released The Fellowship of the Ring, the first of an expensive trilogy of movies based on Tolkien's masterpiece. Before long, there probably won't be anybody left who doesn't have an inkling of what hobbits are like.

This will annoy certain people. If Tolkien has an army of fawning admirers, he also has a legion of fierce detractors. When readers chose The Lord of the Rings as "the greatest book of the century" in a 1997 poll by the British bookseller Waterstone's, the reaction from the critical class was quick and harsh. "Horrifying," gasped the Times Literary Supplement. "Novels don't come more fictional than that," sneered Germaine Greer. "The books that come from Tolkien's train are more or less what you would expect; flight from reality is their dominating characteristic."

If the new film version of The Lord of the Rings is seen as a flight from reality, then it has impeccable timing; after September 11, retreating into a fantasy realm of wizards and ringwraiths sounds like a welcome diversion. The movie does fulfill its simple promise of entertain-