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Review of *Churchill and America* by Martin Gilbert

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B.C.KNOWLTON: REVIEW OF MARTIN GILBERT'S CHURCHILL AND AMERICA (NEW YORK: FREE PRESS, 2005)

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There have been so many books written about Winston Churchill (almost as many as he wrote himself) that any review of any new one should probably begin by considering what it adds to the tale or clarifies in the telling.

Martin Gilbert has himself produced six volumes of biography, and put together as many volumes of documents. He has distilled his Official Biography into A Life of about a thousand pages for the general reader, and has written In Search of Churchill about his life's work on the great man. He has, like Churchill, written histories of both World Wars, though not nearly as voluminously. The story of Churchill and America in the time of the Second World War has been recently retold by Jon Meacham, in his Franklin and Winston, which notes rather than narrates the distasteful implications of John Charmley's revisionist history of the "special relationship." Any account of Churchill's ideas about and dealings with the United States will necessarily center on the

wartime alliance of the two Powers and the working relationship of their leaders. Gilbert re-covers this ground in fine narrative form and with formidable documentary substance. His account does not have the intimacy of Meacham's or the hostility of Charmley's. It does not rehash but rather refines the official biographical treatment of Churchill and America, for readers who would like, in a single volume of half a thousand pages, to read not just another account but a rich history of the complex and intense relationship of the semi-American Englishman with the other, younger, but ultimately more powerful English-speaking nation.

Churchill's mother was Jennie Jerome, the daughter of the American financier Leonard Jerome. His father, Randolph, was the second son of the eighth Duke of Marlborough. We do not hear much about Churchill's parents in this book, though; nor much about their Anglo-American influences upon their son's formation. His personal relationships with them, and theirs with him, may be read about in Gilbert's Life or in Roy Jenkins' Churchill, another worthy biography. But we do read here about young Winston's interest in American history and politics, and there is much more here than in the Life about the influencial friendship of the American politician Bourke Cockran, who was an influence in particular upon Churchill's oratorical style.

There are detailed accounts of Churchill's visits to America, and many of the details come from Churchill's own observations and correspondence. His first visit was in 1895, when he was en route to Cuba to observe as a journalist an uprising against the Spanish colonial authorities. He spent just a week in New York, and was very though not uncritically impressed. His next visit, beginning in late 1900, followed his adventures in the Boer War and his election to Parliament, and was a two-month lecture tour of the east coast, Midwest, and major Canadian cities. He spoke about the historical and cultural kinship of the English and American peoples, speaking of them most often, and ever after, as "the English-speaking peoples." He made a good deal of money from his speaking and writing, though he would not return until 1929.

As First Lord of the Admiralty at the beginning of the First World War, and as Minister of Munitions at the end; dealing first with a neutral and then with an allied United States, Churchill exercised instincts and implemented policies that anticipated his conduct of Anglo-American relations during the Second World War. In both cases he was eager for America to enter the war, but understanding of what that would take. He also appreciated not only the number of soldiers America could send into the line, but the productive capacity it could mobilize in the larger cause. And he saw the wartime alliance as just one aspect of the Anglo-American unanimity that would be the foundation of the postwar peace—and so he was very disappointed at what he considered America's failure to take its place in the League of Nations, and would be as determined to keep the UK and US the most United of the Nations that confronted the next threat to world peace.

Back in America at the beginning of the Great Depression (he was, in fact, in New York when the stock market crashed), and having in the meantime been Chancellor of the Exchequer for five years, Churchill was able to observe and reflect upon both the effects of the crisis and the underlying strength of the American economy and citizenry. He had himself lost a good deal of money, but his speeches and articles earned him a good deal more, which he reinvested in America. He approved of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and during the 1930s continued to speak and write about the "Union of Spirit" that unified the English-speaking peoples. At the same time, Churchill said and wrote so much, and Gilbert has such a command of the documents, that it does become and remain clear that Churchill did not hesitate to express disagreement with American policies, when he did disagree with them; and did not flinch from a defense of British interests, where he thought they were in conflict with the American.

It was certainly in the interest of Britain for America to enter the Second World War, or at least for it to aid Britain as much as it could short of official belligerence toward Germany. Churchill's correspondence with President Roosevelt began when he resumed his post at the Admiralty on the day Britain declared war; and it intensified when he became Prime Minister, on the day Germany began its attack on the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. These communications show both the weakness and the strength Churchill brought to this phase of his relations with America. On the one hand, Britain was in almost desperate need of war supplies of all kinds; on the other hand, Churchill's appeals for aid were made with all his rhetorical force -- with his characteristically acute analysis of unfolding events, and with his long-cultivated and nearly comprehensive sense of history. And, again, the archives contain so many other memoranda, minutes, and reminiscences, that there is also plenty of evidence of Churchill's annoyance with "those bloody Yankees" and his determination to "drag them" into the war.

Before America did enter the war, but when it had begun to send help, Churchill's telegrams to and from the American President were complemented and augmented by his close working and personal relationships with Roosevelt's adviser Harry Hopkins, his Ambassador Gil Winant, and Lend-Lease Administrator Averell Harriman. America had still not entered the war when Roosevelt and Churchill met for the first of ten meetings they would have before Roosevelt's death less than a month before the end of the war in Europe. This book gives the standard, straightforward, but dramatic account of the course of the war from the perspective of the Prime Minister and with his preoccupation with his American ally. But Gilbert does not just recycle old material. He notes, for example, that it is now believed that Churchill did not suffer a mild heart attack during his first visit to Washington in December of 1941. He does, however, introduce Henry Wallace, who was critical of the racialist implications of Churchill's "English-speaking" talk, as Roosevelt's third Vice President. Wallace was in fact his second Vice President, and served during his third term.

Gilbert carries on his narrative with an account of his relations with Roosevelt's third Vice President and successor, Harry Truman, which features the "Iron Curtain" speech and its aftermath. Churchill was by then out of office, but as Elder Statesman was perhaps in a better position to continue to cultivate the special relationship between Britain and the United States. Being out of office, Churchill was also at leisure to write his war memoirs, and in his account of this – a more detailed account of which is now available in David Reynolds' In Command of History -- Gilbert revisits such controversial topics as Churchill's commitment to the cross-channel invasion and his predilection for prodding at the "soft underbelly" of the enemy. Back in office, Churchill reestablished and recast his relationship with Dwight Eisenhower, and made his final attempts to work with the United States to avoid war with the Soviet Union. The narrative ends with Churchill's receiving his honorary American citizenship. Gilbert quotes President Kennedy's remark that "he mobilized the English language and sent it into battle." He was invoking the moment for which Churchill will always be best known by Americans, but suggesting at the same time what most probably and profoundly motivated his affinity and affection for America.