Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill, Sir

The English statesman and author Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill (1874-1965) led Britain during World War II and is often described as the "savior of his country."

Sir Winston Churchill's exact place in the political history of the 20th century is, and will continue to be, a subject of debate and polemical writing. Where he succeeded, and how much he personally had to do with that success, and where he failed, and why, remains to be established. That he was a political figure of enormous influence and importance, belonging in many ways to an age earlier than the 20th century, and that he fitted uneasily into the constraints of British party politics until his moment came in 1940 are not in doubt. Until recently his reputation during the years from 1940 onward was scarcely questioned. But now historians are beginning to reassess his career in just the same way as Churchill himself tried to revise T. B. Macaulay's account of the Duke of Marlborough by writing a multivolumed Life of his distinguished ancestor (completed in 1936).

Churchill's record both before 1939 and after 1945 was for the most part undistinguished. But as Anthony Storr writes: "In 1940 Churchill became the hero that he had always dreamed of being.... In that dark time, what England needed was not a shrewd, equable balanced leader. She needed a prophet, a heroic visionary, a man who could dream dreams of victory when all seemed lost. Winston Churchill was such a man; and his inspirational quality owed its dynamic force to the romantic world of phantasy in which he had his true being."

Early Life

Winston Churchill was born on Nov. 30, 1874, at Blenheim Palace—the home given by Queen Anne to his ancestor the Duke of Marlborough. He was the eldest son of Lord Randolph Churchill, a Tory Democrat who achieved early success as a rebel in his party but who later failed and was cruelly described as "a man with a brilliant future behind him." His mother was Jenny Jerome, the beautiful and talented daughter of Leonard Jerome, a New York businessman.

Winston was conventionally educated following the norms of his class. He went to preparatory school, then to Harrow (1888), then to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. He was neither happy nor successful at school. Winston idolized his mother, but his relations with his father, who died in 1895, were cold and distant. It is generally agreed that as a child Winston was deprived of openly expressed warmth and affection.

Churchill very early exhibited the physical courage and love of adventure and action that he was to keep throughout his political career. His first role was that of a soldier-journalist. Having joined the 4th Hussars in 1895, he immediately went to Cuba to write about the Spanish army for the Daily Graphic. He took part in the repulse of the insurgents who tried to cross the Spanish line at Trochem. In 1896 he was in India, and while on the North-West Frontier with the Malakand Field Force he began work on a novel, Savrola, a Tale of the Revolution in Laurania, which was published in 1900. More important, however, were his accounts of the military campaigns in which he participated. A book about the North-West Frontier and the Malakand Field Force was followed by a book about the reconquest of the Sudan (1899), in which he had also taken part. He went to Africa during the Boer War as a journalist for the Morning Post, and the most romantic of his escapades as a youth was his escape from a South African prison during this conflict.

Young Politician

In 1899 Churchill lost his first attempt at election to the House of Commons. This was to be the first of many defeats in elections and by-elections during his career—he lost more elections than any other political figure in recent British history. But in 1900 he entered the House of Commons, in which he served intermittently until 1964. Throughout this long span his presence and oratory exercised a magnetic attraction in an institution he always refused to leave for the House of Lords.

Churchill's early years in politics were characterized by an interest in the radical reform of social problems. In 1905 he completed a biography of his father, which is perhaps his best book. Lord Randolph had tried to give coherence and organization to a popular socially oriented Toryism; Churchill carried that effort into the Liberal party, which he had joined in 1904 because of his disagreement with the revived demands for protectionism by the Chamberlain section of the Tory party. The major intellectual achievement of this period of Churchill's life was his Liberalism and the Social Problem (1909). In this work he stated his creed: "Liberalism seeks to raise up poverty.... Liberalism would preserve private interests in the only way in which they can be safely and justly preserved, namely by regarding them with public right." Churchill was very active in the great reforming government of Lord Asquith between 1908 and 1912, and his work in palliating unemployment was especially significant.

In 1912 Churchill became first lord of the Admiralty—the range of offices which he held was as remarkable as the number of elections which he lost. He switched his enthusiasm away from butter toward guns, and his goal was the preparation of Britain's fleet for impending war. While at the Admiralty, Churchill suffered a major setback. He became committed to the view that the navy could best make an impact on the 1914-1918 war in Europe by way of a swift strike through the Dardanelles. This strategy proved unsuccessful, however, and Churchill lost his Admiralty post. In 1916 he was back in the army and served for a time on the front lines in France.

Interwar Years

Churchill soon reentered political life. Kept out of the Lloyd George War Cabinet by conservative hostility to his style and philosophy, by 1921 Churchill held a post in the Colonial Office. A clash with Mustapha Kemal in Turkey, however, did not help his reputation, and in 1922 he lost his seat in the House of Commons. The Conservative party gained power for the first time since 1905, and Churchill now began long-term isolation, with few friends in any part of the political spectrum.

In 1924 Churchill severed his ties with liberalism and became chancellor of the Exchequer in Stanley Baldwin's government. His decision to put Britain back on the gold standard was a controversial one, attacked by the economist John Maynard Keynes, among others. Although he held office under Baldwin, Churchill did not agree with the Conservative position either on defense or on imperialism. In 1931 he resigned from the Conservative "shadow cabinet" as a protest against its Indian policy. Ever the romantic imperialist, he did not want to cast away "that most truly bright and precious jewel in the crown of the King." Baldwin and he also disagreed on how to react to the crisis caused by the abdication of King Edward VIII.
Further Reading

World War II

The major period of Churchill's political career began when he became prime minister and head of the Ministry of Defense early in World War II. "I felt as if I was walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour," he wrote in the first volume of his account of the war. (This account was later published in six volumes from 1948 to 1953). His finest hour and that of the British people coincided. His leadership, which was expressed in noble speeches and ceaseless personal activity, stated precisely what Britain needed to survive through the years before United States entry into the war.

The evacuation of Dunkirk and the air defense of the Battle of Britain have become legend, but there were and are controversies over Churchill's policies. It has been argued that Churchill's oversensitivity to the Mediterranean as a theater of war led to mistakes in Crete and North Africa. The value of his resistance to the idea of a second front as the Germans advanced into Russia has also been questioned. And there has been considerable debate over the wisdom of the course he pursued at international conferences such as those at Yalta in February 1945 which reached agreements responsible in large part for the "cold war" of the 1950s and 1960s. But although criticisms may be made of Churchill's policies, his importance as a symbol of resistance and as an inspiration to victory cannot be challenged.

Last Years

The final period of Churchill's career began with his rejection by the British people at the general election of 1945. At that election 393 Labour candidates were elected members of Parliament as against 213 Conservatives and their allies. It was one of the most striking reversals of fortune in democratic history. It may perhaps be explained by Churchill's aggressive vituperation during the campaign combined with the electorate's desire for patient social reconstruction rather than for a return to prewar economic mismanagement.

In 1951, however, Churchill again became prime minister. He resigned in April 1955 after an uneventful term in office. For many of the later years of his life, even his iron constitution was not strong enough to resist the persistent cerebral arteriosclerosis from which he suffered. He died on Jan. 24, 1965, and was given a state funeral, the details of which had been largely dictated by himself before his death.

Associated Events

World War II, 1939-1945

Further Reading

- Churchill's own works, combining a very personal perspective with grand historical themes, are written with great style and lucidity. They include The World Crisis (6 vols., 1923-1931), an account of World War I; The Second World War (6 vols., 1948-1953); and the less satisfactory but sometimes elegant History of the English Speaking Peoples (4 vols., 1956-1958).