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"The Cambridge Companion to Winston Churchill": a Review

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Allen Packwood, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Winston Churchill*. Cambridge University Press, 2023, 484 pp., $90, Amazon $79.75, paperback $29.95, Kindle $28.49.

"Viewed by some as the saviour of his nation, and by others as a racist imperialist," states Cambridge University Press of one of its latest in the *Cambridge Companions to History* series, "who was Winston Churchill really, and how has he become such a controversial figure?" A more honest wording might be: "Viewed by over 90% of Britons and Americans as the saviour of his nation and Civilisation, and by a small but growing band of ignorant idealogues as a racist imperialist, who was Winston Churchill really, and how did we manage to let a band of left-wing academics and Twitterati turn him into such a controversial figure?"

Allen Packwood, Director of the Churchill Archives, is the editor of this collection of twenty academic essays on Churchill. Eighteen are impressive and well written contributions to the sum of our knowledge on Churchill. No one could be better qualified than the charming and equable Mr. Packwood to edit this book, which he makes clear in his introduction is an attempt to introduce "more nuance" into "Churchill's contested legacy." He has written or co-written four of the contributions. He is entirely even-handed in his approach, as is his duty as an academic.

The Cambridge Companion includes eighteen impressive and well written contributions to the sum of our knowledge on Churchill.

What's changed?

The *Cambridge Companion* will therefore give you plenty of insights into "how [Churchill] has become such a controversial figure," but few into what made him the genius, hero and giant that he was and remains. Academics revel in pointing out their subjects' feet of clay, but all too often pay too little attention to the marble in the rest of the statue. This is a relatively new phenomenon.

It is unclear quite when it became *de rigueur* for academics to avoid praising Winston Churchill. Amongst past academics who wrote in high praise of him are such genuine intellectual luminaries as Isaiah Berlin, Leo Strauss, A.L. Rowse, Hugh Trevor Roper, Martin Gilbert, Henry Pelling, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Asa Briggs, Alan Bullock, Paul Addison, A.J.P. Taylor and Roy Jenkins. These people—any one of whom was the equal or superior to anyone writing in this volume—did

not feel that being mealy-mouthed about Churchill's self-evident greatness was politically or professionally necessary, in the way all too many academics seem to nowadays.

Churchill's money

Although we can look in vain for much enthusiasm about the personality or career of Churchill in this book, there is a large amount of interesting material. In an illuminating chapter on Churchill's finances, the leading expert on the subject, David Lough, argues that the importance of Churchill's inheritance lay not in its meagre finances—made more meagre by Lady Randolph Churchill lying to Winston and his brother Jack about the terms of their late father's will—but in what Lough calls "the privileged circle into which he was born."

Lough, however, is overly harsh on Churchill when he accuses him of taking "more pride in the intangible value of his inheritance than he admits in the pages of *My Early Life*." Almost every single purchaser of that book, in those far more class-conscious times, would have known that Churchill was a duke's grandson born in Blenheim Palace. To have belaboured "the intangible value of [Churchill's] inheritance" would have seemed otiose.

Writings and speeches

A highlight of the *Cambridge Companion* is Peter Clarke's essay "Churchill as a Writer and Orator." He points out that Churchill was fortunate to have lived in "the golden age of print," when huge strides in communications, copyright protection and publishing efficiency meant that talented authors could make good livings out of writing books and articles. It was the era before TV, the Internet, pirating, Amazon and electronic media. Those developments ensured that writers' traditional business models went the way of 1820s handloom weavers.

"If I found the right words," Churchill said of his wartime oratory a decade later, "you must remember that I have always earned my living by my pen and by my tongue." It has been rare for a British premier to earn his living by wordsmithery. The only one to have done so before him was Disraeli, and the only one afterwards was Boris Johnson.

What matters, what doesn't

Warren Dockter has written a balanced and thought-provoking essay on the Military Intelligence lessons that Churchill learnt in his early life—in Cuba, on India's Northwest-Frontier, in the Sudan, but mostly during the Boer War. Dockter traces Churchill's views on espionage, censorship, counterintelligence, "Sig-Int," reconnaissance operations, weapon technology, guerrilla warfare and much else to these early experiences of campaigning around the world.

"Perhaps the most telling moment of Churchill's First World War experience was marked," writes Sean Lang, "with an outburst of uncontrollable laughter around the Cabinet table." The occasion was Churchill's telegram from Antwerp in October 1914 suggesting that he step down as First Lord of the Admiralty in order to become a general instead. The Asquith Cabinet found the idea hilarious.

Lang complains that Churchill did not mention the laughter in his memoirs. But since he was in Antwerp at the time, why should he have? Was the idea so ridiculous anyhow, considering the level of competence of Great War generals, and that Churchill subsequently did well as a lieutenant-colonel? The most experienced British soldier alive, Lord Kitchener, certainly didn't think so.

More importantly, was that moment of Cabinet hilarity *really* "the most telling moment of Churchill's First World War experience"? More telling than his getting the Grand Fleet ready for the War? Than transporting the British Expeditionary Force to France without loss? More telling than his pioneering of the tank? Than the Dardanelles expedition? Than fighting in the trenches? Or, at the Ministry of Munitions, creating the shells and ammunition that ensured such astonishing British victories in autumn 1918?

Truths and heresies

Lang denigrates Churchill's pre-1914 military record as having "amounted to no more than a bit of colonial campaigning in his youth, much of it as a war correspondent, and his one serious battle experience was the celebrated but futile charge of the 21st Lancers at Omdurman." Yet Churchill fought in four wars, including in the major battle of Spion Kop that Lang ignores. Far from being a mere "colonial campaign," the Boer War saw half a million men deployed over three years. For Lang to disparage Churchill's brave, wide and life-changing pre-1914 military experience is deplorable.

Lang correctly states that "Churchill's frontline soldiering was no act: he took it seriously and was taken seriously in return…. It is difficult to conceive of how Churchill could have had a better military, political and diplomatic apprenticeship for his role in the Second World War." But why did he have to start by citing Cabinet ministers—only one of whom besides Churchill and Kitchener had worn the King's uniform—laughing at Churchill for wanting to be a soldier during an existential World War? And to call it "perhaps the most telling moment of Churchill's First World War experience"?

Barry Phipps is fair-minded about Churchill's painting, arguing that, "What matters is the astonishing fact that Churchill chose to paint at all. It meant that painting became inseparable from his thinking as a politician, strategist and statesman."

Martin Daunton's contribution to the *Cambridge Companion* argues persuasively that on economics, Churchill was a pragmatist who recognized that the verities of his youth—Free Trade and sound money—no longer applied in his middle and old age. As Churchill put it in his 1930 Romanes Lecture at Oxford, "The compass has been damaged. The charts are out of date."

Famine and Empire

Piers Brendon has long had a love-hate relationship with Churchill, despite having been Director of the Churchill Archives. "Churchill's reluctance to alleviate the Bengal Famine," he writes, "stemmed, at least in part, from a racist animus." This despite the fact that Churchill had no such reluctance, shown by his telegrams to Roosevelt, Dominion Premiers and the Viceroy Lord Wavell urging them to help.

The problem lay in the destruction of rail and road links by the same typhoon that caused the famine; Japanese control of countries such as Burma, Thailand and Malaya; the high prices for rice charged by Bengali merchants who preferred to hoard it as prices rose; and other such factors largely beyond Churchill's control in London. When he writes about Churchill's love of animals, a much more generous-minded Brendon is on display. But not in the *Cambridge Companion.* Brendon's essay on "Churchill, the Roosevelts and Empire" notes the similarity between Theodore Roosevelt and Churchill, how close in personality "the American Bull Moose was to the British Bulldog." TR believed British India had been "one of the most notable achievements of the white race during the past two centuries," a sentiment Churchill wholeheartedly shared.

Brendon also notes the contradiction in Franklin Roosevelt's view of the British Empire: "Like many Americans," FDR "tended to believe both that the British Empire was overstretched and moribund and that it was a colossus threatening world domination." Brendon might believe Churchill had a racist animus, but he is too fastidious an historian not to put the opposing view. Churchill, he writes "condemned the slaughter of wounded Dervishes…the disgusting butchery of natives in Natal…injuries inflicted on indigenous people," and eloquently denounced the Amritsar massacre.

Kishan Rana makes the valid point that WSC did not sufficiently distinguish Hindus in general from Congress separatists. He later he grew fond of Nehru, calling him "the Light of Asia." (Wikimedia Commons)

India and Indians

Kishan Rana, a former Indian ambassador to Germany, is far fairer than Brendon in his essay, "Churchill, India and Race." He notes that the 22 months Churchill spent on the sub-continent in his early twenties "represented his longest concentrated stay anywhere outside of Britain." Rana hails Churchill's denunciation of the Amritsar massacre, as "certainly a singular expression of empathy for the Indian people."

Rana's criticisms of Churchill are reasonable, pointing out that Churchill wildly underestimated the number of India's languages and religions in India—WSC stated 40 languages but in fact there are 121—and also underestimated the "abiding sense of Indianness that has permeated the people of this land over millennia, despite huge diversities, or perhaps because of its multifaceted syncretic culture." This is an intelligent, well written essay, one of the best in the *Cambridge Companion*. Rana criticizes Churchill for making too little distinction between Hindus in general and the Congress Party in particular, and underestimating the secular forces in Indian nationalism, while overestimating Muslim opposition to independence. Rana also bravely argues that the 1942-45 Quit India Movement "was a major blunder" for the nationalists. The Bengal Famine was "not premeditated genocide, but it was symptomatic of systemic neglect and failure." The Bengal administration, Rana adds, was stockpiling food

in anticipation of a Japanese invasion of India. Here was yet another important factor that lay outside Churchill's immediate ambit.

The British Empire comes out badly from the Bengal Famine, Rana argues, but Churchill no worse than anyone else, and better than some. Leo Amery, the Indian Secretary, did not even mention the Famine in his diary until Christmas Eve 1942.

It would have been pleasing to have read a word of reference—let alone thanks—to the blood and treasure Britain expended defending India from a Japanese invasion between 1942 and 1945, but one cannot have everything. If India had been granted full independence in 1935, and invaded by the genocidal Japanese Empire in 1942, we may be sure that Churchill would today be criticized for not coming to her aid.

Appeasement and America

The *Cambridge Companion* includes Gaynor Johnson's cogent essay, noting that Churchill's opposition to German rearmament predated the rise of the Nazis. It "stemmed from a closer, deeper reading of what could be termed the German 'mental map.'" She rightly emphasizes how little effect the campaign against appeasement had, noting that Chamberlain won the Commons vote on Munich by 366 to 144.

Next, David B. Woolner demonstrates that although Churchill did not publicly use the phrase "Special Relationship" until November 1945, the phrase had (typically) been germinating in his mind earlier. It surfaced in his minute of September 1943 stating that in postwar plans, nothing should prejudice "the natural Anglo-American special relationship." It was of course in the Iron Curtain speech that the phrase made its most celebrated appearance.

As one might have expected from such a significant Churchill scholar, David Reynolds' contribution on "Churchill as International Statesman" is one of the pillars of the Cambridge volume. An editor of Stalin's correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt, Reynolds gives plenty of insights into the power play between the Big Three.

Bombing Germany

For someone who has won prizes from the RAF History Museum, Victoria Taylor ought to have approached "Churchill and the Bombing Campaign" more even-handedly. Instead, she writes of Churchill's "incriminating role in the German firestorms." She takes a negative stance over the one way Britain was able to fight back against the Germans after Dunkirk: by bombing their cities in the way that they had bombed ours.

Worse, Taylor tries to make out that the retaliation policy was not popular, citing dubious pacifist organizations and individuals. These certainly did not represent British public opinion. She even claims that in the East End, "Churchill alleged that the watchful crowd had brayed for him to "give it 'em back.'" The word "alleged" implies that Dr. Taylor does not herself believe the crowd really wanted retaliation. Yet Churchill did not go into the East End alone on these occasions, but with his aides and private secretaries. All are unanimous about the response of ordinary Londoners.

To take but one of a legion of examples, Pug Ismay writes of a visit to an air-raid shelter in London's docklands: "As Churchill got out of his

car, they literally mobbed him. 'Good old Winnie,' they cried. 'We thought you'd come to see us. We can take it. Give it 'em back."' There is plenty of other evidence from aides and journalists that retaliating against German cities for the Blitz was overwhelmingly popular. But all Taylor says is that, "Although [Churchill] tended to be favourably received when visiting Blitzed cities across the North and Midlands, his London-centric perspective arguably resulted in him overstating the nation's appetite for retaliation."

Really? Taylor herself cites Churchill's Commons speech of 8 October 1940, in which he stated that "There is also the cry "Give it 'em back.'" She has presumably read the debate, as anyone can here. If Churchill's views were so "London-centric," where are the non-London MPs who take issue with him?

In the entire debate, which covers over ninety columns of Hansard, there is not one word of criticism of the policy of retaliation. No fewer than sixteen MPs, from every part of the country and every political persuasion from Conservative to Communist, made speeches or interventions in that debate. Not one took issue with what Taylor says Churchill "alleged." I challenge Dr. Taylor to show me a sentence of criticism of his retaliation policy in the debate that she herself cites.

Dr. Taylor goes on to criticize Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris, and to allege that Churchill's support for the Combined Allied Bomber Offensive plans at the Casablanca Conference "illustrated once more his significant culpability in shaping British bombing policy during his premiership." Words such as "incriminating role" and "significant culpability," and her references to various anti-Bomber Command historians, show how she believes the Combined Bomber Offensive to have been some kind of war crime. How one longs to put Ms. Taylor into a time machine, send her back to October 1940, and ask her to explain to the Londoners huddling in the Tube and air-raid shelters why it was wrong to bomb the cities of Nazi Germany.

Somehow, Ms. Taylor manages to criticize Churchill both for "not micro-managing [British bombing policy] at the operational level" and for keeping his generals up late at night putting forward plans of action. (Perhaps she believes that war is a 9am to 5pm business.) Her assertion that direct bombing damage to German factories "had only been about 5 percent" fails consider that if so, that was 5 percent more than if they had *not* been bombed.

Dr. Taylor's long quotation of the anti-bombing Bishop Bell of Chichester, her skewed coverage of the bombing of Hamburg and Dresden—the latter of which "signified a complete disregard of the capital of Saxony's immense cultural and historical value"— culminates in the accusation that Churchill helped "to escalate [bombing policy] through years of fiery rhetoric and vengeful sentiment, sullying Bomber Command's reputation in a sly attempt to save his own." The RAF Museum has awarded not one but two prizes to Dr. Taylor, despite her belief that Bomber Command was led by men of "unremitting brutality."

Clementine Churchill

Sonia Purnell's essay in the *Cambridge Companion*, "The Influence of Clementine Churchill," argues that Churchill's wife "was a key to his greatness and ultimate success." Churchill "would likely not have achieved greatness without his wife as his closest advisor and greatest influence."

For all her passionate advocacy, Purnell fails to prove either contention. Of course, Clementine was provided the essential domestic happiness from which Churchill went out to win "greatness and ultimate success." But there is no evidence that her input went much beyond that, at least in the areas from which he derives his historical greatness.

Purnell makes a series of statements, such as that Clementine "set about transforming his [Admiralty] office into a modern command centre," without giving any proof of this. Since there is only one extant letter from Clementine to her husband in 1940, though there is admittedly a paucity of written documentation. She gives an example of Clementine setting up a special enclosure on Horse Guards Parade for the families of those bereaved in the battle of the River Plate, as though that is somehow on a par with Churchill's contributions to the battle itself.

Churchill's greatness rests on the orders he gave, the speeches he delivered, the strategy he designed, and so on. For all Clementine's wonderful capacity for supporting him at home, she was not in the room where those things happened. She would tell the children at Chartwell that they were not to go into their father's room because he was pregnant "with speech," but if Purnell's thesis were correct, she would have been in the room helping him dictate it.

Unelected, Clementine rightly had no constitutional role beyond being a sounding-board. This she fulfilled faithfully and effectively throughout their 57-year marriage. But to mistake her role as one of taking any effective executive action is wrong. She did good work with the Red Cross support for Russia during the war, and much else besides. But Churchill listened just as much to Prof Lindemann, Brendan Bracken, Pug Ismay and others on political and military issues as he did to Clementine, his supposed "closest advisor and greatest influence." She was an important and ever-present support in his life. But the fact remains that Winston Churchill would still have achieved greatness if he had married Pamela Plowden or Ethel Barrymore.

Churchill as xenophobe

Richard Toye's essay on "Churchill and the United States of Europe" reads as though he has fed the information into ChatGPT and printed whatever spewed out. If there is any criticism to be made on Allen Packwood's otherwise excellent editing of this volume, it is that he didn't take a blue pencil to Toye's cliché-ridden prose, as in: "To some degree, he simply wanted to have his cake and eat it, advocating positions that were simultaneously grandiose and vague, and more suited to the poetry of campaigning than the prose of government."

Toye's predictable anti-Brexit rant against what he calls "Europhobes" fails on every intellectual level, but most seriously on the historical

one. Most Churchill historians will take issue with his characterization of Churchill's "standard, rather xenophobic, reputation." With his expounding of universal principles for mankind, his weaving of a genuinely global coalition, and his desire to go to war for Belgium in 1914 and Poland in 1939, when the British Empire was under no direct threat, Churchill was the precise opposite of a xenophobe.

The Cambridge collection

With the sole exceptions of the snide contributions and second-rate history from Taylor and Toye, the *Cambridge Companion* assembles impressive expression of current academic thinking on Churchill. There are useful and well written essays by H. Kumarasingham on Churchill's "Indian Summer" premiership; by Peter Solman on "Churchill and Social Policy"; and by Niamh Gallagher on Churchill's relations with Ireland. All of the contributors besides Taylor and Toye are qualified for the task, and thought has gone Into all of the essays. So Packwood has chosen well in his contributors, the first job of an editor.

There is, however, virtually no sense of actually celebrating the life and achievements of Winston Churchill. Alas, the Academy considers it unprofessional to celebrate full-throatedly the person who saved their freedom of expression and inquiry. That must be left to freelancers outside the Academy, who ought to be happy about the division of labour, since they are amply rewarded in other ways.

Allen Packwood has rendered Churchill scholarship a service with the *Cambridge Companion*. But it falls to Lord (Paul) Boateng, who chairs the Winston Churchill Archive Trust—not a professional academic—to remind us about "the significance of [Churchill's] achievements as a wartime leader in mobilizing the global effort against the evils of fascism."

The subject, but sadly not the hero

Boateng acknowledges Churchill's negative aspects, of course—as every rational biographer outside academe also does. But he points out that Churchill revisionism has "of late taken on an even more strident and polarized tone." He rightly does not mention by name the writers who level foul libels at Churchill—the literary equivalents of spray-painters on Churchill's Parliament Square statue—but I suspect it is Geoffrey Wheatcroft and Tariq Ali who he is referencing.

Lord Boateng rightly concludes that "the freedom to express contested ideas is not to be taken for granted and requires constant vigilance in its defence." The words that free peoples employ in their vigilant defence of the liberty to express contested ideas will largely be those of Sir Winston Churchill: the subject—but sadly not the hero—of this book.

The author

Andrew Roberts (Lord Roberts of Belgravia) is a biographer and historian whose books include *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (winner of the Wolfson Prize for History), *The Storm of War* (winner of the

British Army Book Prize) and *Napoleon the Great* (winner of the Grand Prix Fondation Napoléon). His *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (2018) was acclaimed as "undoubtedly the best single-volume life of Churchill ever written" (*Sunday Times*). He is currently Visiting Professor at the Department of War Studies at King's College, London, the Roger and Martha Mertz Visiting Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and a regular contributor to the Hillsdale College Churchill Project.
