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Winston Churchill: Contextualizing Debates about His Life and Legacy

Ramu Damodaran

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO WINSTON CHURCHILL

Edited by Allen Packwood

Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 440, \$ 29.99

‘Companionship’ can be a limp word; it lacks the intimacy of friendship or the instrumentality of a working relationship. And yet, it serves the title of this volume well, claiming to be neither definitive nor comprehensive, an almost leisurely exploration of the subject, his facets and foibles, his many individualisms and his many more many inconsistencies. Each of the contributors appears to have been given free license to determine their particular focus and the length of their exploration; that this is still stellar scholarship is attested to in fulsome footnotes, that none of the authors duplicate another is testament to editorial dexterity and, I dare say, good humour.

There are, Tariq Ali reminded us last year, more than sixteen hundred volumes written about Winston Churchill. And an imaginative mathematician could quite possibly compute as many distinctive aspects, singly or in combinations, of his being. That the commanding wartime statesman portrayed by Gary Oldman is the very

...whatever the inequities in their

[Roosevelt and Churchill] work together, it did result in arguably the greatest political achievement of the twentieth century, the idea and creation of the United Nations in three swift war-ravaged years; it is fitting that the original draft of its Charter is housed at the Churchill Archives Centre.

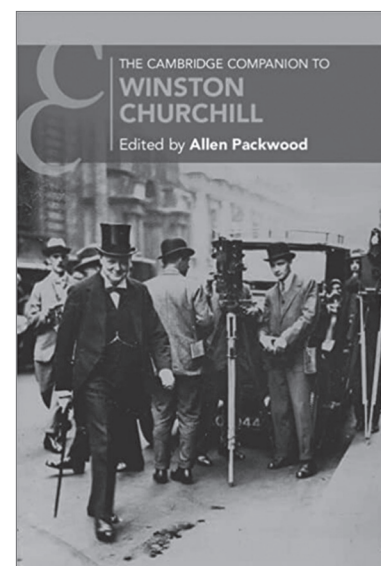
same Prime Minister as the ponderous courtier played by John Lithgow offers its own attestation. ‘To do justice to a great man’, Churchill once said as Packwood and Warren Dockter remind us in the first essay, ‘discriminating criticism is necessary.’

Note the caveats, the essentiality of discrimination and the absolutely understood premise

of greatness, a greatness inherited as much as earned, ‘his father’s political success’, (David Lough) ‘conferred an instant credibility on his son’s name’. The ‘ingenious fiscal devices’ (Peter Clarke) by which he protected his earnings as a writer from large measures of taxation or the unexpected legacy of a Conservative Prime Minister of the ‘the mid-century British welfare state’ (Peter Sloman). Even the years of ‘wilderness’ in the 1930s, when he was out of any office, were ‘some of the most important in his career in public life...often seen as a warmonger by his political peers’ (Gaynor Johnson). He was always first a politician, blaming his military commanders for the bombing of Dresden in a ‘cynical political manoeuvre to exonerate himself from the bombing policy he helped to escalate’ (Victoria Taylor).

It was Churchill the politician, far shy of statesman, too, who looked beyond the immediacy of national borders but brought to their dealing impulses essentially domestic. His ‘inconsistency’ when dealing with Ireland was largely consistent when compared with how he dealt with other vexed ‘questions within the United Kingdom’ (Niamh Gallagher). Sean Lang extends the parallel suggesting the ‘Irish Republicans forced Britain out of most of Ireland and in India the nationalists were clearly hoping to do the same.’ Indeed, there are, to this reviewer, shades of Churchill’s relationship with De Valera in that which he had with Nehru, a ‘fellow-Harroviaan...steeped in the English way of life’ (Kishan Rana), but where the reassurance of similarity did very little to blunt the far sharper edges of difference.

Yet such possible, and plausible, friendships were precisely what he was most clumsy or disdainful about (as so eloquently narrated by Rana in his *Churchill and India: Manipulation or Betrayal* which I had the privilege to review here in January.) *He lived, and ruled, in a world whose political elites were comfortable with ‘western civilization’, predominantly Anglophone, but rather than create a bond similar to, but possibly stronger,



than today's Commonwealth of Nations, he sought subservience even where commerce and conflict argued for an alliance of equals. He limited such an outreach to the 'special relationship' across the Atlantic that bathed his nation's shores, a relationship about which he was to reflect wistfully in 1953, that 'we stood together and because of that fact, the free world now stands'.

'Free world' may well have meant something completely different to him than it did to his transatlantic interlocutors; his 'dispute with Roosevelt on the subject of the British Empire (was) between a Democrat President who wanted to create a new world order imbued with American values and a Conservative Prime Minister who aimed to maintain the old world in all its glory' (Piers Brendon). Another source of disagreement with Roosevelt may well have been 'about ambitious statements on the post-war world'; when the Bretton Woods agreements did come to the House of Commons in December 1945, Churchill instructed Conservative MPs to abstain (Martin Daunton). (Rana recalls in his book that Churchill chose not to attend Roosevelt's funeral 'on the flimsy excuse of too much political work and too many ministers were already abroad. That was an extraordinary lapse of judgment'.) Or was it a deliberate distancing from a relationship, in David B Woolner's phrase, where it was 'clear that the affiliation between the United States and Great Britain was largely framed in American terms,' a pattern that was to persist when an 'incredulous Eisenhower' counseled against Churchill's idea to go to Moscow, after Stalin's death in 1953, 'so that we could renew our own wartime relation' (David Reynolds). That said, whatever the inequities in their work together, it did result in arguably the greatest political achievement of the twentieth century, the idea and creation of the United Nations in three swift war-ravaged years; it is fitting that the original draft of its Charter is housed at the Churchill Archives Centre.

In a life determinedly geared to the front page, to the first headline after the radio pips at nine, there were other lives, personal and yet sufficiently public to allow a historian's scrutiny. He was an artist: 'painting became

There are, Tariq Ali reminded us last year, more than sixteen hundred volumes written about Winston Churchill. And an imaginative mathematician could quite possibly compute as many distinctive aspects, singly or in combinations, of his being.

inseparable from his thinking as a politician, strategist and statesman' (Barry Phipps). A caring husband but 'usually at a loss as how to help (his wife Clementine) with her... serious bouts of depression' (Sonia Purcell). A leader who depended upon the sanction of the led and was aware of how wavering that could prove to be, as reflected in his remarks cited by H Kumarasingham, 'the loyalties which centre around number one are enormous. If he trips, he must be sustained. If he makes mistakes, they must be covered. If he sleeps he must not be wantonly disturbed. If he is no good, he must be pole-axed.'

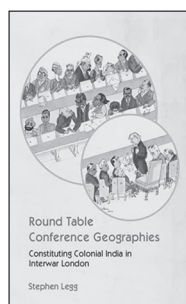
'On closer inspection,' as Richard Toye contends, 'the nineteenth century inspired views of a twentieth century statesman may be a problematic guide to the politics of the twenty first,' although, as Alan Packwood contends in his conclusion, 'Churchill is interesting, and is likely to continue to generate interest because he sits at the crux of so many fundamental debates.' Without elaborating upon Packwood's own instances, we can measure the truth of that statement in the polemics of our times, whether on the matter of lives non-white, or climate colonialism, or the tremulous treads, and trips, of trade or incursions upon sovereign neighbour...each finds articulation in Churchillian policy and, more often, word, both crafted in a world less sensitive than our own and poorer for being so.

When, a hundred years ago, on April 14, 1923, *TIME* magazine placed a much less well-known Winston Churchill on its cover, it placed below his photograph a quotation from him: 'I rest on the written record of my warning.' It was a reference to his writing, in which he saw much history as anticipation, just as surely as he measured his anticipation of events and possibilities by their capacity to create a history to which he was central. As this volume easily and luxuriantly proves, its themes as diverse as their authorships, but effortlessly acknowledging the centrality to them, and the world they inhabit, of one and one alone.

Ramu Damodaran is non-resident Senior Fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress and was the first Director of the United Nations Academic Impact global network of universities.

Book News

Book News



Round Table Conference Geographies: Constituting Colonial India in Interwar London by Stephen Legg explores the spaces and events of the interwar Round Table Conference which drafted the blueprint for colonial India's constitutional future. This geographical analysis explores the imaginations, infrastructures, urban spaces and

contestations of the meeting.

Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 375, ₹ 1595.00