

## Sir Winston Churchill

Statesman, historian, and biographer (1874-1965), whose five years of war leadership (1940-45) secured him a central place in modern British history.

Churchill is widely considered the greatest political figure in 20th-century Britain. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953. It was an open secret that he would have preferred the Nobel Peace Prize. Churchill's career was anything but predictable: he supported the Zionist movement in Palestine (1921-22), during the Abdication crisis (1926) he was loyal to Edward VIII, and during the 1945 election campaign he tried to brand Labour as a totalitarian party.

'Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age, made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will say, "This was their finest hour."' (Churchill in his speech on June 18, 1940)

Winston Churchill was the son of conservative politician Lord Randolph Churchill and his American wife, Jennie Jerome, and a direct descendant from the first Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722). Churchill was at the bottom of his class in school. He attended Harrow and Sandhurst, from which he graduated twentieth in a class of 130. Shortly after his father's death in 1895, he was commissioned in the Fourth Hussars. He soon obtained a leave, and worked during the Cuban war as a reporter for the London Daily Graphic.

"It is better to be making the news than taking it; to be an actor rather than a critic." (from *The Malakand Field Force*)

From 1896 to 1897 Churchill served as a soldier and journalist in India, and wrote the basis for *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (1898). "Writing is an adventure," Churchill once said. "To begin with, it is a toy and amusement. Then it becomes a mistress, then it becomes a master, then it becomes a tyrant. The last phase it that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster and fling him to the public."

In 1898 Churchill fought at the battle of Omdurman in Sudan, depicting his experiences in *The River War, an Account of the Reconquest of the Sudan* (1899). Churchill's several books dealing with his early career include *My African Journey* (1908) and *My Early Life* (1930). Churchill resigned his commission in 1899, and was assigned to cover the Boer War for the *London Morning Post*. His adventures, capture by the Boers, and a daring escape, made Churchill a celebrity and hero on his return to England in 1900.

In 1900 Churchill was first elected to Parliament. He switched from the Conservatives to the Liberal Party in 1904. In 1908 he married Clementine Ogilvy Hozier, with whom he had one son and three daughters. This relationship brought much happiness and security throughout Churchill's lifetime.

Between 1906 and 1911 Churchill served in various governmental posts, and was appointed Lord of the Admiralty in 1911. As Home Secretary (1910-11) he used troops against strikers in South Wales.

After the outbreak of First World War he supported the Dardanelles Campaign, an operation against the Turks. He had encouraged the development of such weapons as the tank, and was generally credited with the British Fleet's preparedness in August 1914. But abortive expeditions to Antwerp and Gallipoli and the failed action at the Dardanelles did great harm to Churchill's reputation and career. Reduced in 1915 to minor office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, he resigned. Churchill rejoined the Army, and rose to the rank of colonel. In 1917 he was appointed Lloyd George's minister of munitions, subsequently becoming the state secretary for war and air (1918-21), and colonial secretary (1921-22). During the post-war years he was active in support of the Whites (anti-Bolsheviks) in Russia.

At the election of 1922 Churchill was defeated as an Anti-Socialist. A rabid anti-Bolshevik, he further alienated critics by a third abortive military expedition - to help the White Russians on the Murman Coast. He left Parliament in 1922, returning to the House in 1924 as a Conservative. From this period he is remembered for his role as Chancellor of the Exchequer (1924-29) for the part he played in defeating the General Strike of 1926 as an opponent of organized labour when the latter came into direct conflict with the principle of public order and government.

Whilst out of office, Churchill began writing *The World Crisis*, which appeared in six volumes (1923-31). The work was attacked by the eminent poet and critic Herbert Read in *English Prose Style* (1928). He described Churchill prose as being high-sounding, redundant, falsely eloquent and declamatory, sharing his view with the younger post-war generation of writers who praised the virtues of simplicity. In 1924 Churchill was elected to Parliament, and appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer. Churchill's defence of the gold standard earned him the wrath of the economist John Maynard Keynes, who saw the policy as the cause of deflation, unemployment, and even the General Strike of 1926.

After the Conservative defeat of 1929, Churchill was again out of office. His absence from government lasted a decade. During this time he wrote a four-volume biography of his ancestor, *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (1933-1938).

"I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."  
(from a radio broadcast, October 1, 1939)

With the outbreak of World War II Churchill was appointed first lord of the Admiralty. On May 10, 1940, he became Prime Minister, and established close ties with U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Yalta meeting with Roosevelt and Stalin resulted in the dissection of Europe into opposing political jurisdictions. His strategic misjudgement was blamed for the wartime success of Germany in Africa, Norway, and the Aegean. He had difficulty tolerating Charles de Gaulle, and he told a friend: "Of all the crosses I have to bear, the heaviest is the Cross of Lorraine."

On 8 May Churchill announced the unconditional surrender of Germany. His Conservative party was defeated by the Labour party in the 1945 election, but he continued as Opposition leader in the House

of Commons: against Indian independence, and in favour of the United Nations, a unified Europe, and manufacture of the hydrogen bomb.

Churchill emerged from WW II as a national hero, but was out of the office for several years. However, he led the Conservative opposition, and remained active as a political thinker. His history *The Second World War* appeared in six volumes (1948-54). The work was received with mixed critics, praised for its grandeur, but Volume 2 (the period through 1941) was considered poorly arranged, and Volume 5 (through 1944) seemed to most critics a falling-off from earlier volumes.

"The quality of Churchill's volumes on the Second World War is that of his whole life. His world is built upon the primacy of public over private relationships, upon the supreme value of action, of the battle between simple good and simple evil, between life and death; but, above all, battle." (Isaiah Berlin in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 1998)

In 1951 Churchill again became Prime Minister, and was knighted in 1953. Next year he was acclaimed by the Queen and Parliament as 'the greatest living Briton'. Churchill's efforts to bring an end to the first phase of the Cold War by a summit conference between himself, Eisenhower and Stalin (1952-55) turned out to be fruitless. He resigned from the Prime Minister's office in 1955 and was succeeded by Anthony Eden. He had suffered a paralytic stroke a few years before. After his retirement he published the monumental *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956-58), which concentrated on politics and war. At Westerham, Kent, Churchill concentrated in painting, masonry, and horse racing. He frequently dictated letters to his secretaries half-dressed and often roamed around his rooms at Chartwell nude when he awoke.

"I am ready to meet my Maker," Churchill said on his 75th birthday. "Whether my Maker is prepared for the ordeal of meeting me is another matter." Churchill died on January 24, 1965, after suffering cerebral thrombosis. Later historians have been critical of Churchill's actions and relationships with world leaders, and the opening of British government files in the 1980s have brought new material into daylight. The conviction that Churchill was among the most important men in modern history have remained unchanged.