Churchill, The Victorian Man of Action

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The most common public image of Winston Churchill may be the wartime picture taken by the famed photographer, Yousuf Karsh. The British leader glowers out from that photograph, truculent and combative. Never mind that the menacing look was reportedly caused by Karsh's insistence that Churchill remove his ever-present cigar from his mouth. What remains is that quintessential aura of resistance and defiance against all odds that came to symbolize the spirit of the nation Churchill led throughout World War II. Paradoxically, this image of a modern warlord in the greatest of all 20th-century conflicts owes its existence to the late Victorian era into which Churchill was born in 1874. For it was during those years in the Indian Summer of Queen Victoria's reign that the future British Prime Minister developed his singular traits of character and formed his concepts of war and personal leadership that were to endure throughout his long life.

Foremost among the Victorian influences on the young Churchill was a pervasive sense of historical continuity that stretched beyond the Victorian years. To begin with, there was Blenheim with its obelisks of victory, its grand vistas that created a sense of drama, and the great achievements carved ubiquitously in stone, woven in tapestries, and painted on canvas. It was a monument, in short, to one man, John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough, whose exploits fed into the unique Whig legend devised by the British in the intervening centuries to underpin their imperial ambitions. It was in that castle that Churchill was born, and it was among the patrician descendants of the great Whig aristocracy from Stuart and Georgian England that he spent his formative years. It was thus no accident that he never deviated throughout his life from what the British historian J. H. Plumb has described as "that curious ideology of the Whigs, half truth, half fiction; half noble, half base."[1]

In pursuing that course, Churchill was doing no more than accepting the historical assumptions of his fellow patricians in the late 19th century. For them, English history was an evolutionary development by trial and error in which the Englishman's inherent national characteristics such as love of liberty

and justice were gradually matched by the appropriate institutions of government. There were problems throughout this process, of course, ranging from the Stuarts and Civil War to the loss of America and the threats posed to institutions by industrialization. But the Empire that emerged from those travails was the greatest and most just in history, founded on the richest and freest democracy the world had ever known. In this interpretation, to which Churchill fully subscribed, it was the play of time working on natural genius that produced Great Britain and its institutions. Finally, it was the landed Whig squirearchy, the "great Oaks" as Edmund Burke referred to them, who had been through the centuries England's natural rulers, the guardians of her destiny, and who had brought that miraculous historical development to fruition.[2]

British imperialism, in the later Victorian era, was an extension of the Whig version of England's development. Two years before Churchill's birth, Disraeli had confirmed this in his Crystal Palace address, in which he denounced the Liberals for viewing colonies simply from an economic viewpoint, ignoring "those moral and political considerations which make nations great, and by the influence of which alone men are distinguished from animals."[3] It was these higher considerations that caused Victorians to venerate the soldiers on the Imperial frontier, those men of action who maintained the British Empire, which by the time of Churchill's formative years was an engulfing red splash on the world map, three times the size of the Roman Empire.

The young Churchill was extremely susceptible to such hero worship. On 14 February 1885, he wrote to his father in India commenting on the death of Colonel Frederick Gustavius Burnaby, Royal Horse Guards, who had been killed in action the previous month "sword in hand, while resisting the desperate charge of the Arabs at the battle of Abu Klea."[4] The letter was indicative of the name recognition concerning the heroic Victorian men of action. Burnaby had ridden through Asia Minor to Persia, served as a war correspondent for *The Times*, and had undertaken a solo balloon flight from Dover to Normandy. It never occurred to the 11-year-old Churchill that his father would not have heard of the colonel.

But if the daily exploits of such heroes were not enough, there was always the prolific pen of George Alfred Henty. In 1876, Henty published the first of his 80 novels on English and Imperial history. Whether it was with Wolfe

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at Quebec or with Clive in India, young Victorians like Churchill could relive vicariously every British triumph throughout the Empire. In 1898, the year that Churchill participated in Kitchener's victory over the Mahdi at Omdurman, it was estimated that Henty's annual sales were as high as 250,000.[5] Added to this was the wide variety of nonfiction dealing with the same subject. Between 1852 and 1882, the increasingly literate British masses purchased 31 editions of Creasy's *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*, at least partially, according to Herbert Spencer, to "revel in accounts of slaughter."[6] Equal success awaited the Macmillan series entitled "The English Men of Action," each story of 250 pages being immediately sold out. By 1891, such stories were the staple of the popular press. That year, a new series entitled "Story of the VC: Told by those who have won it" appeared in the new *Strand Magazine* and enjoyed as much success as the Sherlock Holmes short stories that also began in the magazine that year.[7]

From these influences, Churchill created an inner historical world in which there were only the grand and the grandiose. Progress was measured through politics and war, rarely in terms of economic, intellectual, and social issues. Throughout his long life, he was always conscious of the continuity in this world and of his place in it. At one point in June 1940, for instance, General Ismay, his Chief of Staff, urged him to delay sending troops to organize a redoubt in Brittany. "Certainly not," was the Prime Minister's immediate reply. "It would look very bad in history if we were to do any such thing."[8] And in December 1943, while Churchill was recovering from pneumonia at Eisenhower's villa at Tunis, his physician reported that the British leader was well enough to mutter with his lifelong lisp: "I shpposhe it ish fitting I should die beshide Carthage."[9]

Like the great heroes of old, Churchill was at stage center in his inner world, at all times, as he had written of Pitt the elder, "a projection on to a vast screen of his own aggressive dominating personality."[10] Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's envoy in World War II, recognized this early in the war. "Churchill . . . always seemed to be at his Command Post on the precarious beachhead," he wrote; "wherever he was, there was the battlefront—and he was involved in the battles not only of the current war but of the whole past, from Cannae to Gallipoli."[11] That romantic outlook was captured in 1913 in an astonishingly prescient biographical sketch of Churchill in A. G. Gardiner's *Pillars of Society*:

> He is always unconsciously playing a part—an heroic part. And he is himself his most astonished spectator. He sees himself moving through the smoke of battle—triumphant, terrible, his brow clothed with thunder, his legions looking to him for victory, and not looking in vain. He thinks of Napoleon; he thinks of his great ancestor. Thus did they bear themselves; thus, in this rugged and most awful crisis, will he bear himself. It is not make-believe, it is not insincerity; it is that in that fervid and picturesque imagination there are always great deeds afoot with himself cast by destiny in the Agamemnon role.[12]

School life only accentuated these tendencies. The British public schools were an integral part of the 19th-century English patrician life. The spirit of those select institutions was captured in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, the 1856 fictional account of life at Rugby under that school's famous headmaster, Dr. Arnold. The book provided an ideal of life for two generations of British schoolboys, best summed up in Squire Brown's parting thoughts concerning Tom: "If he'll only turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman, and a gentleman and a Christian, that's all I want."[13]

Underlying that ideal in Tom Brown was a tradition of manliness from the English squirearchy with its cult of games and field sports and its emphasis on physical strength and prowess. It was also a morally righteous manliness to be used against bullies—usually older, if not stronger—in defense of the small and the weak, the downtrodden fags that seemed to populate Hughes' Rugby. Allied to this theme, but even more fundamental to the manly tradition, was the concept of combativeness, the love of a good fight. "After all," Tom Brown conjectures, "what would life be without fighting, I should like to know! From the cradle to the grave, fighting, rightly understood, is the business, the real, highest, honestest business of every son of man."[14]

By the time Churchill entered Harrow in 1888, the manliness cult in the public schools was an essential element of the new imperialism, as fresh generations of military men of action and civilian ruler administrators were produced for the Empire. The school experience reinforced the future British leader's determination to make himself physically and mentally tough, to mold himself in more courageous, heroic, and manly terms than were naturally his in physique and temperament. "I am cursed with so feeble a body," Churchill wrote his mother from Sandhurst in 1893, "that I can scarcely support the fatigues of the day."[15] His frustration was understandable. He stood five feet, six and a half inches at the time, with a chest measurement of 31 inches, inadequate by Sandhurst standards. He had extremely sensitive skin and, as has been noted, suffered all his life from a difficulty, like his father, in pronouncing the letter "s." As a young man, he would walk up and down attempting to remedy this problem by rehearsing such phrases as: "The Spanish ships I cannot see for they are not in sight." Later on the lecture circuit, he began to cure his lisp and to lose the inhibitions that it had caused. "Those who heard him talk in middle and old age," his son commented later, "may conclude that he mastered the inhibition better than he did the impediment."[16]

Despite these physical disadvantages and a temperament that was not naturally courageous, Churchill emerged as a mentally tough, physically brave man. In fact, it was precisely because he lacked the very mental and physical traits that were the quintessential staples of the British public schoolboy and the Victorian man of action that Churchill persevered, forcing himself to go against his inner nature. It would be a lifelong and successful effort to compensate, to keep, as he termed it, from "falling below the level of events."[17]

As a consequence, the history of Churchill's involvement in the late Victorian wars was one of continual search for physical danger, whether it was with the Malakand Field Force on India's northwest frontier in 1897, with Kitchener's forces in the Sudan in 1898, or with Lord Roberts' troops in the Boer War at the turn of the century. "I am more ambitious for a reputation for personal courage than [for] anything else in the world," he wrote early on in the Malakand Field Force campaign, and the remainder of his first combat experience was involved in achieving that goal.[18] It required constant test and examination—a matter, in other words, of finding situations which afforded "opportunities for the most sublime forms of heroism and devotion." "I am glad," he wrote his mother, "to be able to tell you . . . that I never found a better than myself as far as behaviour went;" no one, he pointed out a month later, would "be able to say that vulgar consideration of personal safety ever influenced me."[19]

Churchill's experience in 19th century wars also confirmed a ruthless rationality and pragmatism in Victorian combat. Under the new imperialism, there was in all classes almost a religious faith in Britain as the great force for good in the world. That England could be in the wrong in any one of the countries splashed with red on the world map was almost inconceivable, particularly against itinerant natives. Those tribesmen would often mutilate the British wounded and dead, as Churchill discovered in India. In return, he noted, the British "do not hesitate to finish their wounded off. . . . I have not soiled my hands with any dirty work—though I recognize the necessity of some things."[20]

It was a rationale that could also be applied to weapons, such as the new Dum-Dum bullet fired from the Lee-Metford rifle. Churchill had nothing but praise for the expansive character of the new round, "a wonderful and from the technical point of view a beautiful machine," since it "tears and splinters everything before it, causing wounds which in the body must be generally mortal and in any limb necessitate amputation." Results and effectiveness were the ultimate criteria. "I would observe," Churchill concluded on the Dum-Dum, "that bullets are primarily intended to kill, and these bullets do their duty most effectively without causing any more pain to those struck by them than the ordinary lead variety."[21]

That pragmatic approach to weapons and technology gained further ascendancy as the young Victorian continued to encounter the realities of military life on the Imperial frontier. In late 1897, Churchill and a small group of British and Indian troops from the Malakand Field Force were being pursued by a band of Swati tribesmen. The lead warrior paused to slash at one of the British wounded, and Churchill, as he later recounted, decided to kill him.

> I wore my long Calvary sword well sharpened. After all, I won the Public School fencing medal. I resolved on personal combat *à l'arme blanche*. The savage saw me coming. I was not more than twenty yards away. He . . . awaited me, brandishing his sword. There were others waiting not far behind him. I changed my mind about the cold steel. I pulled out my revolver, took . . . most careful aim, and fired.[22]

In a similar manner, at Omdurman in 1898 during the initial charge of the 21st Lancers, Churchill used a ten-shot Mauser pistol instead of a saber. After the battle, Churchill walked among the thousands of Dervish bodies stacked on the battlefield and found "nothing of the dignity of unconquerable manhood."[23] Those feelings were reinforced by a steadily mounting British casualty list that included many of his closest friends. "The realization came home to me with awful force," he wrote later, "that war, disguise it as you may, is but dirty, shoddy business which only a fool would undertake. Nor was it until the night that I again recognized that there are some things that have to be done, no matter what the cost."[24] Duty was something that late Victorians could understand. And with duty would come the romanticizing of what had to be done. The brave deeds of Omdurman, Churchill told his readers in the *Morning Post*, "brighten the picture of war with beautiful colours, till from a distance it looks almost magnificent, and the dark background and dirty brown canvas are scarcely seen."[25]

Such sentiments did not survive the First World War. That conflict was a gradually evolving shock not only to Churchill, but to the British public who also approached it with Victorian idealism and optimism compounded by romantic public school notions of chivalry and combat. "War declared by England," a schoolboy destined to die in that conflict wrote in his diary on 5 August 1914. "Intense relief, as there was an awful feeling that we might dishonour ourselves."[26] Disillusion began to creep in as the carnage mounted. But the horror of modern warfare was generally concealed well into the conflict from the British public by a conspiracy of silence in the form of stiff upper, if not sealed, lips. That tendency was supported by the popular literature of the time. There was, for instance, a rear-guard fictional movement for most of the war in which a band of brothers continued to protect the weak and vanquish the villains under the leadership of such heroes as Bulldog Drummond and Major-General Richard Hannay. And in 1917, Conan Doyle ended *His Last Bow*, the final volume of Sherlock Holmes, by observing that after the war, "a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine."[27]

For Churchill, the full impact of the conflict came midway through the war after his resignation from the Asquith government when he moved to the Western Front. There, from January to May 1916, he commanded the 6th Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers, located at the village of Ploegsteert on the Ypres-Armentieres road. Even then, Churchill's command experience at "Plug Street" only confirmed his ambivalence about war in the modern era. On the one hand, no matter how grim the troglodyte world of the trenches, there was the visceral, combat exultation that had not changed since the days of the Malakand Field Force. "My beloved," he wrote to his wife in January, "I have just come back from the line, having had a jolly day."[28] In that context, even the grimness of attrition warfare could be viewed through the romantic

prism of death's grandeur in a Victorian "last stand" for men of action. In a letter written while an offensive was in progress, Churchill referred to "the bloody & blasted squalor of the battlefield," noting of a battalion that had lost 420 men out of 550 in that battle: "I shd feel vy proud if I had gone through such a cataclysm."[29]

On the other hand, there was the daily proof offered by the ongoing carnage of Verdun. "Do you think we should succeed in an offensive," he wrote to his wife in April, "if the Germans cannot do it with all their skill & science?" And that same month, he wrote to a friend that Verdun seemed "to vindicate all I have ever said or written about the offensives by either side in the West."[30] Churchill returned to the subject of Verdun in May 1916 after his release from the army. In a speech to the House of Commons, he reminded his listeners that every 24 hours, nearly a thousand men, "English, Britishers, men of our own race, are knocked into bundles of bloody rags."[31]

The effect of all this for the men of action, Churchill observed as he looked back during the first decade after World War I, was the "obliteration of the personal factor in war, the stripping from high commanders of all the drama of the battlefield, the reducing of their highest function to pure office work." For him, the modern commander had become "entirely divorced from the heroic aspect by the physical conditions which have overwhelmed his art."

> No longer will Hannibal and Caesar, Turenne and Marlborough, Frederick and Napoleon, set their horses on the battlefield and by their words and gestures direct and dominate . . . the course of a supreme event. No longer will their fame and presence cheer their struggling soldiers. No longer will they share their perils, rekindle their spirits and restore the day. They will not be there. They have been banished from the fighting scene, together with their plumes, standards and breast-plates.[32]

The general in such an environment was, for Churchill, no more than a "high-souled speculator," who would in the future "sit surrounded by clerks in offices, as safe, as quiet and dreary as Government departments, while the fighting men in scores of thousands are slaughtered or stifled over the telephone by machinery." It would be efficient, but not heroic. "My gardener last spring," he commented in that regard, "exterminated seven wasp's nests. . . . It was his duty and he performed it well. But I am not going to regard him as a hero." It would be, as Churchill envisioned it, a pale, lifeless, unromantic, unemotional world of the masses, without the splash of color and the verve of great deeds and individual heroism.

> The heroes of modern war lie out in the cratered fields, mangled, stifled, scarred; and there are too many of them for exceptional honours. It is mass suffering, mass sacrifice, mass victory. The glory which plays upon the immense scenes of carnage is diffused. No more the blaze of triumph irradiates the helmets of the chiefs. There

> is only the pale light of a rainy dawn by which forty miles of batteries recommence their fire, and another score of divisions flounder to their death in mud and poison. . . . The wars of the future will be even less romantic and picturesque.[33]

Nevertheless, the Great War could not completely destroy Churchill's reverence for such abstractions as glory, honor, and courage, which remained for him permanent and reliable, no matter what had transpired in the grim world of the Western Front. After that conflict, someone remarked in his presence that nothing was worse than war. "Dishonour," he immediately replied in full voice, "is worse than war. Slavery is worse than war."[34] It was not that Churchill failed to see the conditions of modern war, as he experienced them. "Never for a moment," he could write to his wife in 1917, "does the thought of this carnage & ruin escape my mind."[35] But he would not allow the squalor to penetrate fully his inner Victorian core. His romantic perception of what conflict had been for men of action and therefore what it should be remained a dominant counterweight to his realistic assessment of total war. It was a perception so powerful that it influenced even the disillusioned like Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon later recounted how he wondered if Churchill, during their September 1918 meeting, had been entirely serious when he said that "war is the normal occupation of man." Churchill had gone on to add "war—and gardening" as a qualifier. "But it had been unmistakable," Sassoon concluded, "that for him war was the finest activity on earth."[36]

It was, of course, not as simple as Sassoon described. Churchill's portrayal, for instance, of the French General Mangin reflected the ambiguity of his feelings. On the one hand, there was the incredibly brave and resourceful general personally leading the men at Verdun and along the Chemin des Dames "like a hungry leopard." On the other hand, there was "Mangin the Butcher," relieved temporarily for the losses his leadership had inflicted on his own troops. In a similar manner, there was his mixed analysis of General Hubert Gough, the Fifth Army commander. "He was a typical cavalry officer, with a strong personality and a gay and boyish charm of manner," Churchill wrote. "A man who never spared himself or his troops, the instrument of costly and forlorn attacks, he emerged from the Passchendaele tragedy pursued by many fierce resentments."[37]

Amidst this ambiguity, Churchill could still find the heroic men of action as he looked back on the Great War in the late 1920s. There was, for instance, Bernard Freyberg, the New Zealander, whom he had befriended as a sub-lieutenant at the beginning of the war, commanding elements of four divisions in 1918 while successfully holding a front of 4000 yards. And there was General Tudor and his Ninth Division, whom he visited just before the Ludendorff offensive in March 1918. "The impression I had of Tudor," Churchill wrote, "was of an iron peg hammered into the frozen ground, immovable. And so indeed it proved." Before he left the battlefield that day, Churchill turned and

once again looked back on the men of the Ninth Division. "I see them now, serene as the Spartans of Leonidas on the eve of Thermopylae."[38]

Strength, in other words, even in total war, was not enough for Churchill. There must also be the valor and steadfastness of the men of action that he had known in his early years in a previous era. Marshall Foch, in this view, despite disastrous errors, was redeemed by his "obstinate combativeness." "He was fighting all the time," Churchill wrote of Foch, "whether he had armies to launch or only thoughts."[39] Such characteristics, Churchill came to believe, were even more important at the political level of total war, when national survival was the stake. That lesson was provided by Georges Clemenceau, whom he met many times during the war and who, he considered, "embodied and expressed France. As much as any single human being, miraculously magnified, can ever be a nation, he was France." It was the fiery French Premier's indomitability and willingness to take any measures on both the home front and the fighting front in order to emerge triumphant that most impressed Churchill. "Happy the nation," he wrote of Clemenceau, "which when its fate quivers in the balance can find such a tyrant and such a champion." And in a passage that presaged his own emergence in the spring of 1940, Churchill described Clemenceau's final call to public life, which marked the beginning of the end for France's misfortunes: "He returned to power as Marius had returned to Rome; doubted by many, dreaded by all, but doom-sent, inevitable."[40]

In the 1930s, as he researched and wrote his history of Marlborough, Churchill returned again and again to his ancestor's "combination of mental, moral, and physical qualities adapted to action which were so lifted above the common run as to seem almost godlike." His studies renewed his faith in the man of action, whose every word "was decisive. Victory often depended upon whether he rode half a mile this way or that."[41] Such a man could make a difference in any type of conflict, particularly if he combined valor with common sense. In the fourth volume of his biography, Churchill lingered over the aftermath of the battle of Elixem in which Marlborough had pierced the Lines of Brabant with almost no Confederation casualties. Even as the battle neared its end, his grateful troops responded with spontaneous mass affection. As Marlborough rode up sword in hand to take his place in the final cavalry charge, the soldiers and their officers broke into cheering, extremely unusual considering the formal military etiquette of the time. And afterwards, when Marlborough moved along the front of his army, the veterans of Blenheim, as Churchill described it, "cast discipline to the winds and hailed him everywhere with proud delight."[42]

Surely there was still room in modern warfare for men like Duke John, who, in order to seal the victory at Ramillies, personally led a cavalry charge on the left wing, in Churchill's words "transported by the energy of his war vision and passion."[43] A world without emotional romanticism, without heroic men of

action, did not have to be the fate of total war. "There is a sense of vacancy and of fatuity, of incompleteness," he wrote as he observed disillusioned Britain in the interwar years. "We miss our giants." If the British people, Churchill warned, quit "the stern, narrow high-roads which alone lead to glorious destinies and survival," there would be nothing left but a "blundering on together in myriad companies, like innumerable swarms of locusts, chirping and devouring towards the salt sea."[44] Despite modern forces and trends, despite the stark realities of modern life and warfare, there must still be the indefinable, romantic aspirations of Victorian times. Britain had emerged victorious from the Great War on a new and higher plateau, Churchill concluded,

> but the scenery is unimpressive. We mourn the towering grandeur which surrounded and cheered our long painful ascent. Ah! if we could only find some new enormous berg rising towards the heavens as high above our plateau as those old mountains down below rose above the plains and marshes! We want a monarch peak, with base enormous, whose summit is for ever hidden from our eyes by clouds, and down whose precipices cataracts of sparkling waters thunder.[45]

That mountain peak appeared when Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940. Immediately his rich, romantic historical sense of continuity dominated the scene, allowing him to proceed with what appeared to many an obstinate irrationality against overwhelming forces in the darkest days of the war. But he knew with an absolute certainty that it had been done before, not the least successfully by the first Duke of Marlborough.

This perception of historical continuity also fueled Churchill's sense of personal destiny as a man of action, a key ingredient of his success as a leader in the Second World War. "The statesman . . . must behold himself," Hans Morgenthau has pointed out in this regard, "not as the infallible arbiter of the destiny of men, but the handmaiden of something which he may use but cannot control."[46] And so it was with Churchill, who believed that he was the servant of a historical entity called England, and that he was destined to maintain that entity and its Empire on the upward path that reached back to Alfred the Great. It was this belief, this inner certainty, that could inspire the masses in general, and his civilian and military subordinates in particular. One scientist described the effect whenever he met Churchill during the war as "the feeling of being recharged by contact with a source of living power."[47] On another occasion, the Permanent UnderSecretary of War in 1940 urged the Prime Minister to meet with a general about to leave on an urgent arms purchase mission to the United States, "in order that he may have the glow of Mount Sinai still on him when he reaches Washington."[48]

To his feeling of destiny, Churchill brought an absolute sense of combativeness from his Victorian heritage as a man of action. On 10 June 1940, as an example, in another one of the increasingly dismal Anglo-French meetings,

French Premier Reynaud asked the Prime Minister what would happen if France capitulated and all of German strength were concentrated upon invading England. Churchill replied instantly that he had not thought out his response in detail, but that basically he would drown as many as possible of the invaders on their way over to England, leaving it only to "*frapper sur la tête*" anyone who managed to crawl ashore. At the end of that meeting, the increasingly emotional British leader once again reassured his French counterpart that Britain "would fight on and on, *toujours*, all the time, everywhere, *pas tout, pas de grace*, no mercy. *Puis la victoire*!"[49] That such emotions were also governed by Churchill's Victorian concept of the heroic last stand was illustrated in a conversation he had with President Roosevelt's Special Envoy, Averell Harriman, while sailing to the United States on the *Queen Mary* in spring 1943. When that conversation turned to the U-boat menace, the Prime Minister informed Harriman that he had arranged for a machine gun to be added to his own lifeboat, should it be necessary to abandon ship. "I won't be captured," he concluded. "The finest way to die is in the excitement of fighting the enemy."[50]

But it was in Hitler that Churchill found a perfect outlet for his combative nature—a threat on which he could bring to bear the full brunt of his command of the English language. When, for instance, he spoke of the "Na—sies," the very lengthening of the vowel carried a stunning message of his contempt. Moreover, there were always the visual images invoked by his vivid descriptions of the enemy. Von Ribbentrop was "that prodigious contortionist," and Mussolini was a "whipped jackal, frisking at the side of the German tiger—this absurd imposter." And when Barbarossa was unleashed on Russia, he brought the event, which Hitler considered would cause the world to hold its breath, down to its basic level. "Now this bloodthirsty guttersnipe," Churchill announced, "must launch his mechanized armies upon new fields of slaughter."[51]

Against this threat and despite the realities of a newer, even more complicated total conflict, the British leader returned in the Second World War to his Victorian concept of the heroic man of action. Closely allied to Churchill's ingrained hero worship was his Victorian sense of honor. How men conducted themselves in crisis was all-important to him. The Czechoslovak legionaries after World War I, for instance, "forsook the stage of history" in their dishonorable treatment of the White Russian leader, Admiral Kolchak. In World War II, Pétain was a similar example. Admiral Darlan, on the other hand, redeemed himself in Churchill's eyes with the 1942 scuttling of the French fleet at Toulon.[52] It was an outlook that often penetrated the remoteness necessary to send masses of heroic men to their deaths in total war. The German sinking of the *Royal Oak* in Scapa Flow in October 1939, for instance, triggered Churchill's overactive imagination concerning the 800 "heroes" who had lost their lives. "Poor fellows, poor fellows," he muttered after receiving the news, "trapped in those black depths. . . ."[53] And in the later stages of the war, General Eisenhower witnessed

a meeting at Chequers when a logistics briefer struck a nerve in the normally imperturbable Prime Minister by using the phrase "so many thousand bodies" in referring to British reinforcements. "Sir," Churchill broke in with great indignation, "you will not refer to the personnel of His Majesty's Forces in such terms as 'bodies.' They're not corpses. They are live men, that's what they are."[54]

This sensitivity to the soldier was complicated by the ambivalence about conflict that had dogged Churchill since the era of total war began. "War is a game played with a smiling face," he told his daughter Sarah at Tehran in 1943, "but do you think there is laughter in my heart?"[55] And yet he was still fascinated by it. Captured German combat films, for instance, often marked the evening's entertainment. He also loved newsreels of the war and took particular delight if he was featured, often shouting to General Ismay: "Look Pug, there we are."[56] And, finally, there was his pride in *Desert Victory*, the film history of the Eighth Army, which he viewed over and over again, even sending a copy to Stalin.

J. F. C. Fuller touched upon a major reason for Churchill's ambivalence in a description that he eventually excised from his classic *The Conduct of War*. "The truth would appear to be," he wrote of the British leader, "that throughout his turbulent life he never quite grew up, and like a boy, loved big bangs and playing at soldiers."[57] Certainly, Churchill felt more intense exhilaration in battle than most professional soldiers. At one point early in World War II, enemy bombing commenced as he was being conducted around antiaircraft sites in Richmond Park. Only after great difficulty and many protests could the commander persuade the Prime Minister to take cover. "This exhilarates me," Churchill gleefully explained. "The sound of these cannons gives me a tremendous feeling."[58]

It was a pattern that was to be repeated many times in the war. Only George VI's intervention, for instance, kept Churchill from sailing with the assault forces on D-Day. "There is nothing I would like better than to go to sea," the King wrote his Prime Minister, "but I have agreed to stay at home; is it fair that you should then do exactly what I should have liked to do myself?"[59] Such restraint could last only a short time. A week later, Churchill crossed the Channel and had, as he wrote Roosevelt, "a jolly day . . . on the beaches and inland."[60] In another example, Churchill also described in his memoirs how he had gone to view a railroad bridge over the Rhine in March 1945 and how incoming artillery rounds had forced him and his party, escorted by the American General Simpson, to move off the bridge. General Alanbrooke also described the scene, detailing how urgently Simpson had requested that Churchill evacuate the bridge. "The look on Winston's face was just like that of a small boy being called away from his sand-castles on the beach by his nurse!" he wrote. "He put both his arms around one of the twisted girders on the bridge and looked over his

shoulder at Simpson with pouting mouth and angry eyes. . . . It was a sad wrench for him; he was enjoying himself immensely."[61]

Churchill's presence at the Rhine crossings demonstrated a key advantage offered him by the British constitution which ideally suited his temperament and views on leadership as a man of action. Unlike Roosevelt, constrained because of his special position as President, or Hitler, who elected to isolate himself increasingly in command posts, the British Prime Minister traveled freely within the war zones. This allowed him to solve major military issues by face-to-face contact with his operational commanders. Moreover, the fact that his constitutional role did not prevent him from visiting the front lines meant that he could fulfill his romantic conception of a war leader at the scene of action. Wherever he went, whether in the fighter control rooms of 1940, in the Egyptian desert, on the beaches at Normandy, or at the Rhine crossings, Churchill's visible, inspirational presence in the most outrageous of ad hoc uniforms was a key factor that contributed not only to the prosecu-

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Visiting the US Ninth Army at the front, Churchill views an artillery barrage on the east bank of the Rhine at Wesel, 25 March 1945. With him are General Alanbrooke (left) and General Montgomery (center).

tion of the war, but to the genuine affection in which he was held by the officers and men throughout the services.[62]

Such visits also renewed Churchill, allowing him to escape from the pressures of his office and exercise the degree of personal leadership that he associated with the great men of action from previous eras. Writing to his wife in August 1942 from Egypt, he recounted his visit to the front lines where he "was everywhere greeted with rapture by the troops," the same words he had used in his Marlborough biography to describe the great commander in 1705 after the battle of Elixem.[63] And on 3 February 1943, Churchill flew to the forces just outside of Tripoli. In a small natural amphitheater, he told the assembled soldiers and airmen that "after the war when a man is asked what he did it will be quite sufficient for him to say, 'I marched and fought with the Desert Army.'"[64] The next day, he drove in an armored car into Tripoli, moving past the assembled forces, who were amazed to see the Prime Minister among them but recovered sufficiently to remove their helmets and give three cheers. A short time later in Tripoli's main square, surrounded by veterans of the Eighth Army, Churchill took the march past of one of the desert divisions, the tears streaming down his face.

But leadership in total war goes beyond that exercised on the battlefield. Ultimately, it depends on the people. And it was here that Churchill's background as a Victorian man of action made its most lasting contribution to World War II. For it was primarily because of national will that Britain survived that conflict. And that national will owed its existence to a 19th-century man in his seventh decade, who in his dealings with the British people returned to his Victorian inheritance and allowed his emotional, romantic picture of his country and its citizens full rein. It was a picture that did not reflect the contemporary world of 1940. Instead, Churchill created an imaginary world of action steeped in Victorian visions with such power and coherence and imposed it on the external world with such irresistible force that for a short time it became reality. Imagination can be a revolutionary force that destroys and alters concepts. But as Churchill demonstrated, imagination can also fuse previously isolated beliefs, insights, and mental habits from an earlier time into strongly unified systems. In those systems he created romantic ideal models in which by dint of his energy, force of will, and fantasy, facts were so ordered in the collective mind as to transform the outlook of the entire British population.

Those facts were firmly grounded in the British leader's sense of historical continuity which had always engendered in him high expectations for the British people. "I hope that if evil days should come upon our country," he wrote after contemplating the thousands of Dervish dead at Omdurman, "and the last army which a collapsing Empire could interpose between London and the invader was dissolving in rout and ruin, that there would be some . . . who would not care to accustom themselves to the new order of things and tamely

survive the disaster."[65] And so it was in 1940 when he molded the people's aspirations to fit his by recognizing no other mood in them than what he felt. During the Blitz, while walking with Churchill in the garden at Chequers one evening after dinner, General Ismay remarked how the Prime Minister's speeches had inspired the nation. "Not at all," was the almost angry retort from Churchill, who could see the glow of London burning in the distance. "It was given to me to express what was in the hearts of the British people. If I had said anything else, they would have hurled me from office."[66]

This was the essence of Churchill's power. If his fellow citizens were not initially with this man of action in their hour of danger, that soon changed. Because he idealized them with such fevered intensity, in the end they approached his ideal and began to view themselves as he saw them with their "buoyant and imperturbable temper." It was the intense eloquence in his speeches that caught the British people in his spell until it seemed to them that he was indeed expressing what was in their hearts and minds. As a consequence, Churchill created in 1940 a heroic mood in which his countrymen conceived a new image of themselves as acting in a larger litany of great deeds ranging from Thermopylae to the Spanish Main. He imposed those responses through his speeches and through his expectations of the people, which in turn caused the British people to impose upon the present, however momentary, the simple virtues they believed had prevailed in the past. The combination of his personality and powerful imagery focused through the medium of radio invested the squalid and fearful circumstances of those days with overtones of glory.[67]

In the end, Churchill accomplished all this, not by catching the mood of his country, which in Isaiah Berlin's estimate was "somewhat confused; stout-hearted but unorganized," but by being obstinately impervious to it, as he had always been to the details, to the passing shades and tones of ordinary life. For him, the Battle of Britain was "a time when it was equally good to live or die."[68] His busy imagination, imposed on his countrymen, lifted them to abnormal heights in their nation's supreme crisis and allowed Churchill to enjoy a Periclean reign. But it could last only a short time. It was a climate in which people normally do not want to live, demanding as it does a violent tension, which if not soon ended, destroys normal perspectives, overdramatizes personal relationships, and distorts normal values to an intolerable extent. Nevertheless, for a time in the 1940s, by dramatizing their lives and making them seem to themselves and to each other as acting appropriately for a great historic moment, Churchill transformed the British people into a collective, romantic, and heroic whole—a supreme optimization for total war.[69]

It was natural, then, that at the moment of victory, Churchill should turn again to the people whose faith, which he had unconsciously brought forth, had done so much to sustain him. "This is your victory!" he told the vast VE-Day crowds assembled before him as he stood on the Ministry of Health balcony overlooking Whitehall. The crowd immediately roared back:

"No—it is yours." Later that night, Churchill addressed another crowd stretching far up Whitehall to Parliament Square. "My dear friends, this is your hour. . . . It is a victory of the great British nation as a whole. We were the first . . . to draw the sword against tyranny. . . . There we stood alone. Did anyone want to give in?" "No," the crowd shouted. "Were we downhearted?" "No," was the response to the greatest of all Victorian men of action.[70]

NOTES

1. J. H. Plumb, "The Historian," in *Churchill Revised, A Critical Assessment*, ed. A. J. P. Taylor (New York: Dial Press, 1969), p. 133. See also H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951).

2. Plumb, p. 135.

3. Herman Ausubel, *The Late Victorians* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1955), p. 135.

4. Randolph S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. 1, *Youth, 1874-1900* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 61.

5. Janet and Peter Phillips, *Victorians at Home and Away* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 166.

6. Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 210-11.

7. Phillips, p. 166.

8. Lionel Hastings Ismay, *The Memoirs of General Lord Ismay* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), p. 142.

9. S. W. Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals* (New York: William Morrow, 1978), p. 224.

10. Maurice Ashley, *Churchill as Historian* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 216-17.

11. Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins, An Intimate History* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), p. 241.

12. Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, Vol. 3, *The Challenge of War, 1914-1916* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 132.

13. Bernard Darwin, *The English Public School* (London: Longmans, Green, 1929), p. 26.

14. Houghton, p. 203. Herbert Tingsten, *Victoria and the Victorians*, trans. David Grey and Eva Leckstroem (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), p. 51.

15. R. Churchill, I, 203.

16. Randolph S. Churchill, *Winston Churchill*, Vol. 2, *Young Statesman, 1901-1914* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), p. 28. See also ibid., I, 282.

17. Churchill's phrase in his 6 March 1915 letter to Sir Edward Grey. Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1915* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 205; Anthony Storr, "The Man," in Taylor, pp. 235-36.

18. Letter, 4 December 1897. Randolph S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill, Companion Volume 1, pt. 2, 1896-1900*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), pp. 833-34.

19. Letters, 2 November and 22 December 1897. Ibid., pp. 815 and 839.

20. Letter, 2 October 1897. R. Churchill, *Companion Volume 1, pt. 2*, p. 797.

21. Winston S. Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War* (New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, 1901), p. 288. In Churchill's only novel, *Savrola*, when told that it will be necessary for government troops to fire on a crowd in order to create a diversion, the officer in charge replies: "Excellent, it will enable us to conclude those experiments in penetration, which we have been trying with the soft nosed bullet." Winston S. Churchill, *Savrola, A Tale of the Revolution in Laurania* (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 11.

22. Churchill wrote, "Whether I hit him or not, I cannot tell. At any rate he ran back two or three yards and plumped down behind a rock." Winston S. Churchill, *A Roving Commission* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 142.

23. Frederick Woods, *Young Winston's Wars: The Original Dispatches of Winston S. Churchill War Correspondent 1897-1900* (New York: Viking, 1972), p. xxiv.

24. Winston S. Churchill, *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan* (London: Longmans, Green, 1902), p. 360.

25. Woods, p. 122.

26. Mark Girouard, "When Chivalry Died," *The New Republic*, 30 September 1981, p. 28.

27. Ibid., p. 29 and Phillips, p. 189.

28. Gilbert, III, 643.

29. Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, Vol. 6, *Finest Hour, 1939-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p. 521n.

30. Letter to Lord Birkenhead. Gilbert, III, 754-55.

31. Gilbert, VI, 521.

32. Winston S. Churchill, *Thoughts and Adventures* (London: Odhams Press, 1949), pp. 198-99.

33. Ibid., pp. 198, 200.

34. Collin Brooks, "Churchill the Conversationalist," in *Churchill By His Contemporaries*, ed. Charles Eade (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 302. See also Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 21.

35. Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, Vol. 4, *The Stricken World, 1916-1922* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 111.

36. Ibid., p. 151.

37. All quotes in the paragraph, Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1916-1918*, pt. 2 (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1927), pp. 426, 496, 501.

38. Ibid., pp. 410, 412, 435. Freyberg, a VC winner in World War I, remained a hero to Churchill, who was to place him in command of Crete in the next war. One day in the interwar years while visiting Freyberg, Churchill asked the New Zealander to show him his wounds. "He stripped himself," Churchill recounted, "and I counted twenty-seven separate scars and gashes." Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 3, *The Grand Alliance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), p. 273.

39. Winston S. Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1937), p. 190.

40. Ibid., pp. 302, 310, 312.

41. Winston S. Churchill, *Marlborough, His Life and Times*, Vol. 3, *1702-1704* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 116.

42. Winston S. Churchill, *Marlborough, His Life and Times*, Vol. 4, *1704-1705* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 215.

43. Ashley, p. 152.

44. W. S. Churchill, *Thoughts and Adventures*, pp. 196, 201.

45. Ibid., p. 202.

46. Hans J. Morgenthau, "Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State," *Encounter*, 5 (November 1974), 61.

47. R. V. Jones, *Most Secret War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978), p. 107.

48. Gilbert, VI, 697.

49. Ismay, p. 141, and Gilbert, VI, 507.

50. W. Averell Harriman and Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941-1946* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 205.

51. Leslie Hore-Belisha, "How Churchill Influences and Persuades," in Eade, p. 338, and Richard Dimbleby, "Churchill the Broadcaster," ibid., p. 353.

52. Ashley, p. 230.

53. Gilbert, VI, 672.

54. James Nelson, ed., *General Eisenhower on the Military Churchill* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 19.

55. William Manchester, *The Last Lion. Winston Spencer Churchill: Visions of Glory: 1874-1932* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1983), p. 10.

56. Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, Vol 7, *Road to Victory, 1941-1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 354.

57. Excised section of Fuller's manuscript provided by Professor Jay Luvaas, US Army War College.

58. Gilbert, VI, 828.

59. Ronald Lewin, *Churchill as Warlord* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), p. 247. When Churchill asked Eisenhower if he could go in with the initial wave at Normandy, Eisenhower turned him down, adding: "And I think it's rather unfair to give me another burden on a day like this." Nelson, p. 38.

60. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol 6, *Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), p. 15.

61. Arthur Bryant, *Triumph in the West* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1959), p. 334, and W. S. Churchill, *Second World War*, VI, 416-17.

62. Lewin, pp. 21-22.

63. Gilbert, VII, 167.

64. Ibid., p. 330.

65. Ashley, p. 49.

66. Ismay, p. 156.

67. Isaiah Berlin, *Mr. Churchill in 1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, n.d.), pp. 26-27.

68. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol 2, *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 279.

69. Berlin, pp. 28-29.

70. Gilbert, VII, 1347-48.