

## **Hans Renders review of Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny***

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### **Winston Churchill: Cast-iron faith in democratic freedoms and a lifelong love for military action, siestas and cigars**

It appears that over 1,000 biographies of Winston Churchill have been written. A total that does not include the innumerable number of books dealing with particular aspects from the life of this British statesman: Churchill and money, Churchill and Islam, Churchill's doctor, Churchill and World War I, or the attention paid to him in the biographies of his wife, Clementine Spencer, the prime ministers both before and after him, and his father, the first of which was written by Churchill himself.

Yet still, Andrew Roberts has dared to publish a fresh new biography on the distinctive, perennially cigar-smoking statesman, of which he smoked 160,000, according to his biographer. It incorporates new archival material that Roberts uncovered as the first researcher to access the archives of King George VI. The biography comprises more than 1,100 pages. This isn't all that much in Churchillology when one considers the fact Martin Gilbert published his 6-part biography of Churchill between 1971 and 1988, after he assisted Churchill's son Randolph in writing 2 volumes on Churchill's early years. A careful biographer, Gilbert published a further 20 titles on Churchill.

Roberts is a biographer of a different sort. Five years ago he also published a remarkably hefty volume on Napoleon that was positively received the world over. The same now goes for his biography on Churchill. In almost every Western country this book has been reviewed in several newspapers (I did it for the Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* of 30 March 2019). Almost all those reviewers noted that Roberts is a Tory and that he writes attractively. Indeed, Roberts is a joy to read. One is impressed by his smooth writing style, his immeasurable archival knowledge, and his ability to connect world history to a cantankerous and diminutive (1.67 metres tall) man who, like a pink piglet, dressed in flannel pyjamas and lectured his secretary staff from his bed.

Churchill lived an extraordinarily full life. For starters there were his experiences as a soldier, or as a war reporter, in Cuba, Bombay, the Sudan, India, Belgium and the Dardanelles. During the second Boer War in South Africa he was taken prisoner and managed to escape. When he returned in July 1900 to London, he was welcomed as a national hero. Already, back then!

Roberts does a very good job highlighting Churchill as a journalist and historian. Right from Churchill's first steps onto the battlefield he published a stream of articles for prestigious newspapers, not only in England but also in the United States. Invariably these articles turned out to be a trial run for a monograph. He published nearly 40 books, of which half consisted of multiple volumes. Roberts has determined that this oeuvre—apart from the speeches that were also published in book form—contains 6.1 million words, more than Shakespeare and Dickens published put together. Churchill was always actively writing, whether as minister (from 1910), secretary of state, or lord of the Admiralty, or during the many years he was simply a member of the House of Commons. Even when he was a citizen without a regular salary, his 'writing factory' occupied his time and provided him with the necessary income to sustain his ever lavish lifestyle.

This biography beautifully describes how Churchill often saved his own political life, or damaged that of others, because he was such an improbably gifted speaker. That in the process he was willing to shed tears, proved either his sincerity, or that he was a talented actor. His speeches and articles made many a prime minister realise that Churchill could wreak more havoc outside of government than he could as a government official. That insight on the part of his political enemies earned him a variety of ministerial positions. National hero or not, many a politician despised Churchill. Not in the least because he defected from the Conservative party to the Liberal party and then back to the Conservative party again 20 years later.

An admirer of strong male characters, Churchill's interest ranged from Napoleon to the first Duke of Marlborough, John Spencer-Churchill, on whom he published a 2-part biography. He also had a complex, yet enduring, love for his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, son of the seventh Duke of Marlborough. Randolph, writes Roberts, was an opportunistic and ruthless politician. An excellent orator in the House of Commons too. Randolph, however, had a dark side. He tried to blackmail the Prince of Wales over a love affair. This meant the end of Randolph Churchill's political career, a man for whom the prime ministership was within his reach.

Winston Churchill tried all his life to polish his father's reputation. This is all the more striking considering this father was extraordinarily harsh to his son. When the young Churchill wrote a letter from boarding school to his parents, it would sometimes be returned unceremoniously to its sender unread 'due to sloppy handwriting'. Roberts manages to unearth beautiful quotations that illustrate the strenuous relationship

between Winston and his parents. At 17 years of age: ‘Come, come, come, come, come to see me please,’ begged the boy, ‘because you have already disappointed me so many times by not coming’.

A good reason to keep reading new biographies of Winston Churchill is that he is often referred to in current events. During the campaign for Brexit (Britain’s departure from the European Union), Boris Johnson regularly claimed that Churchill would have agreed with him. We know that Johnson was being less than truthful. Johnson knows very well what Churchill thought about European cooperation during the war, because he himself published a biography about the man in 2014. Immediately after Churchill became prime minister in May 1940, no matter how proud he was of his own country (and initially critical of the European Economic Community), he showed himself a fervent supporter of the European spirit. In fact, in June 1940 the new prime minister came close to incorporating his country into a French–British union to prevent France from surrendering to Berlin and the French fleet from falling into Hitler’s hands. This plan, which he discussed in London with the recently appointed French under-secretary of defence Charles de Gaulle, also had the support of the French premier, but the *Assemblée* voted against it. Churchill, already a Francophile, remained an admirer of De Gaulle. That he also found him to be terribly irritating and chauvinistic did in the end not diminish his admiration. When Churchill later wrote his memoirs he softened all sorts of negative references found in letters and government documents about De Gaulle and his ‘impertinent’ behavior.

## **Feathers on a scale**

However, there are things that Robert’s biography of Churchill can be criticised for. While his biography of Napoleon ran to almost 1,100 pages, it was a magnificent book and consequently its enormous size was not a detraction. His account of Churchill, however, is unnecessarily thick. Large parts of this book are more of a chronicle than a biography. The long struggle Churchill had to undergo to finally become prime minister is sometimes told hour by hour, and in such detail, that when something truly important happens, it no longer stands out. Also Roberts is a little too defensive for my taste. Or one could say, the Tory biographer is too much in line with the conservative biographee. Churchill has been attacked often and for many things. Though Roberts does acknowledge criticisms, he invariably remarks that the matter was different. And in that he is probably right, but it remains a rhetorical trick to downplay the political and military blunders that Churchill also made. This is the case with, for example, the fall of Antwerp (1914), the battle for the Turkish Dardanelles (1915) and the Narvik drama (1940), where Churchill made some serious errors in judgement.

Because the Churchill historiography is such a vast subject, seeing what was left out and wondering why is a fun sport. That Churchill was once gifted a white horse by the Dutch businessman Bernard van Leer, better known as 'De Vatenman' (the Vatsman), is deemed not worth mentioning by Roberts. Or that Churchill, according to the historian Max Hastings, heedlessly believed in October 1914 that he could make history by defending Antwerp from the German army with a platoon of sailors, and ordered himself a Rolls Royce and 25 bouquets of roses ahead of time to brighten his entry into the Belgian capital. Hastings, in his book *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*, deems Churchill's role in the fall of Antwerp as 'the shocking foolishness of a minister who abused his powers and committed an act of treason'. It is understandable that Roberts omits Hastings's quote. He admits that Churchill made an error in judgement in entering Antwerp.

In fact, as Roberts makes clear, Churchill spent 65 years preparing for his job as prime minister during World War II. He became prime minister on the first day of Hitler's invasion of Western Europe: 10 May 1940. The longest section of this biography is about this war. For years Churchill had been warning that Hitler could not be trusted, that he would try to conquer Europe and attack England. What was remarkable was how often Hitler mentioned Churchill, who was hated by so many in England, in his speeches. That this dictator felt it necessary to mock a backbencher impressed even Churchill's biggest opponents. After the Nazis showed their true face, Churchill's cautions were finally heard and in May 1940 he became prime minister. His biggest accomplishment is not so much that he halted the Nazis, as Roberts justly writes, but that he prevented the British government making peace with Hitler, and all the humiliating conditions that would have come with that.

Churchill has without exaggeration become mythical, perhaps more so in the United States today than in Europe. This is remarkable if one considers that next to his heroic and courageous battle for freedom and democracy, he also became the embodiment of a number of views that we now find reprehensible. Gandhi, who in India carried out his peaceful activism against colonial England, was dismissed by Churchill as an unruly little lawyer who pretended to be a fakir, to which Gandhi replied with a letter to Churchill: 'I have been attempting for some time to become a fakir, and that while (too) naked – an even more difficult task. Therefore I regard your remark as a compliment, unintentional though it may be'. An accusation that is often levelled at Churchill is that in 1943 he deliberately prolonged a famine in India by preventing food relief and is therefore guilty of genocide, this is strongly downplayed by Roberts. Churchill also opposed women's suffrage for years, which led to him being physically attacked by suffragettes on multiple occasions, and making it impossible for him to speak by sounding a large bell. Later, after he had seen how women had played an important role in the war, he came to believe that giving women the vote was a good thing.

Churchill won the Nobel prize for literature for his 6-part memoirs, which he wrote after World War II. For this he had plenty of time because, in spite of his popularity, the conservatives suffered a huge defeat to Labour, and Clement Attlee became the new prime minister in 1945. 'That's democracy', responded Churchill. Still, he was happy to return to the office of prime minister in 1951, serving in that role until his 80th year.

At the end of his book, Roberts makes a final assessment. He sums up quite a list of mistakes Churchill made alongside his ironclad heroics. Alas, these are but feathers on a scale, so goes his conclusion. And one is inclined to agree with him. Perhaps this book had to be as thick as it is to show how improbably active Churchill was all his life. You could even say that there is more that could be said, but that is what all those other biographies are for, in which you can read how the statesman passionately developed as a portrait painter and how he became skilled in bricklaying as a means to relax.

Churchill died, as he had predicted years before, on the anniversary of his father's death, 24 January 1965. In London, the largest funeral ever was organised (for a non-royal family member). The heads of state of 112 countries walked by as he lay in state. One of those present, at 1.95 metres tall, towered above all the others: Charles de Gaulle. 'It wasn't a funeral', said his wife Clementine that night, 'it was a triumph'.

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