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BOOK REVIEW

William Manchester and Paul Reid (eds): The Last Lion: Winston Churchill: Defender of the Realm 1940-1965

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William Manchester wrote big books about big topics: the Depression, the war in the Pacific, biographies of individuals as different as John F. Kennedy, H.L. Mencken, Douglas MacArthur, as well as the Rockefeller family. But the major interest of the last years of his literary career was the life and times of Winston Churchill.

Late in his life he undertook a massive biography of Winston Church, the man he would label, "The Last Lion." Volumes one and two, which appeared in 1983 and 1988, focused on Churchill's career up to the beginning of World War II. The two volumes running over 1700 pages were old fashioned, narrative histories of Churchill's life which bordered on sheer hero worship despite the fact that during these years in his life Churchill was seen as an interesting failure. The two volumes were based largely on secondary material and added little that was new to our understanding of Churchill's life. Despite that they were also a huge popular success, fueling interest in the final part of the trilogy, the war years. These were the years when Churchill rightly could be seen as the man who saved the West during the darkest days of World War II, the year and a half from the defeat of France in May 1940 until the German blunder in attacking the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor which brought the United States into the war six months later.

Manchester gathered material for volume three in the 1980s and 1990s drawing heavily on the standard sources for Churchill's war years: Robert Rhodes James' compilation of his speeches, the volumes of Martin Gilbert's magisterial biography of Churchill for the war years as well as Churchill's own great history of the war. He also relied heavily on the standard secondary sources for World War II, particularly William Shirer study of the rise and fall of Nazi Germany and Molly Ponter-Downes reports on the British scene that were published in the *New Yorker*. As a result there is little that is new or original in Manchester's researches or in his interpretations of Churchill's actions during the war. What gives his study weight are a series of interviews he did with key figures in Churchill's life among them his daughter Mary Soames, Robert Boothby, Pamela Harriman and most importantly, Jock Colville, Churchill's private secretary.

Due to illness-he suffered a series of strokes—Manchester was unable to complete the volume that would deal with the pinnacle of Churchill's life. He turned to a friend, the journalist Paul Reid whose work he admired, and asked him to undertake the last volume: "You write. I'll edit." In effect, however, due to Manchester's declining health this meant that Reid would write the final chapter of the Churchill story. Using much of the material that Manchester had accumulated, Reid did so in a manner and style that reflects Manchester's previous volumes—an easy to read narrative packed with interesting digressions about the war as well as lively portraits of Churchill's close friends and adversaries.

The question emerges who will want to read the almost 1200 word volume? Even Churchill's many admirers might be intimated by its sheer size and weight. It is difficult to hold for one thing. Does it have anything new to add to our knowledge of Churchill's role in World War II? Probably not. Special studies by Geoffrey Best, John Lukacs, Richard Holmes and most significantly, Carlo D'Este's *WarLord*, which covers much of the same ground as Manchester, have more to say about Churchill's unique contribution to the war. Despite that, Manchester is to be congratulated for telling the story of the war and Churchill's role in it, in a clear and lively fashion.

Churchill is a fascinating figure to write about. His career which spanned over a half century is the most significant for any political figure of the twentieth century. His very idiosyncrasies make it almost impossible to write a bad book about

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him. (Only David Irving, the wronged-headed historian whose work has been accused of being pro-Hitler, has managed to do it in his impossibly distorted *Churchill's War*) Manchester's first chapter, "The Lion Hunted" is a character sketch and delight to read as it sets the stage for what was to follow. It is filled with amusing yet revealing Churchill insights: he never rode a bus, never carried cash, only rode the London Underground once in his life, during the General Strike of 1926, worked on his papers in bed with a pet cat or budgerigar for company. Churchill rarely was seen without his famous cigars. He smoked about 18 a day. Stories of his drinking are exaggerated although he enjoyed his whisky and had wine and especially champagne with his meals. He was in effect a Victorian eccentric, something of a romantic, the last of those giants like Gladstone, Disraeli and Joseph Chamberlain who shaped England's future.

Any yet when the crisis of war came he was precisely the right man for the right time. 1940 was the supreme year of his life—the year he always said he would want to relive–when he rose to meet the greatest challenge in his nation's history. Manchester makes an interesting point that even during the grimmest moment of the war in 1940, during the darkest days of the Battle of Britain where England's very survival was at stake Churchill already was plotting offensive operations. Unlike Hitler who consistently misjudged him, Churchill grasped the Nazi leader's flaws. In July 1940 at the height of the German military success, Hitler believed that England would soon sue for peace. Not only did Churchill never contemplate that, he predicted that Hitler would turn toward Russia, something most of his political and military advisers rejected.

Churchill's strategic insight was built around a number of key pillars as Manchester notes. Cultivate close ties with the United States and the person of Franklin Roosevelt in particular. At all costs, avoid another bloodletting like World War I where the British suffered 750,000 young men killed. A third consistent theme was Churchill's belief that the Mediterranean was the pivot of the British Empire. Lose the Mediterranean and the British war was lost.

How Churchill sustained these policies forms the core of volume three. Manchester is critical of how slow the United States was in coming to Great Britain's aid in 1940 and 1941. He argues that Roosevelt was too cautious and even misled Churchill about United States actions until Pearl Harbor. Although Churchill and Roosevelt formed a good partnership, Manchester notes the contradiction between the British and American view of the war. The United States and in particular General George Marshall wanted to confront Germany in Europe and avoid the "side-shows" that Churchill favored: North Africa, Sicily, Italy and especially any actions in the Balkans.

Manchester accepts the view that Churchill's obsession with the Balkans was based on his fears of growing Soviet influence there. He promoted expanding the Italian campaign in 1944 to include a strike through the Ljubljana Gap with the goal of reaching Vienna before the Russian army did. But as Rick Atkinson points out in his definitive study of the military campaigns of 1944-1945, *The Guns at Last Light*, Churchill's idea of stealing a march on the Russians in Central Europe was impractical. The area was mountainous, the gap between the mountains narrow and an ideal defensive barrier. Atkinson notes that the Italians and Austrians had fought in this region for four years in World War I and neither side succeeded in a real breakthrough.

Manchester notes how by 1943 especially by the time of the Teheran conference in October of that year, Churchill recognized that his influence was fading as Britain material and manpower contribution to the war was being outstripped by the Americans. Manchester demonstrates how he sought to keep alive the role of the British Empire in the war effort in face of growing American domination. He also shows Churchill's relationship with Roosevelt fading in the last years of the war. Roosevelt not only neglected Churchill's advice but he also began to ridicule him as old fashioned, preferring to believe that he (Roosevelt) would be best able to cultivate and deal with Stalin. Lukewarm to the idea of an invasion of continental Europe Churchill went along as a way of maintaining British influence in the war and the post war world.

Manchester really ends his study with the conclusion of the war. Only 130 pages deal with Churchill's post-war years. Manchester argues that Churchill sought to reinvent himself as a world statesman, He championed the cause of a United Europe, and he warned by his Iron Curtain speech of the danger of Soviet expansionism. He never carried through with the first because he wanted to maintain a role for the British Commonwealth of Nations and because it conflicted with his idea of a "Special Relationship" with the United States.

The last great campaign he waged was to revive the idea of a meeting of the Big Three—what he called a 'parley at the summit'-to resolve East-West issues. That came to naught.

Manchester spends little time on Churchill's second premiership, 1951-1955, what some have called his 'Indian Summer of Power.' He was old and tired and suffered a severe stroke in 1953. He grew jealous of his designated successor, Anthony Eden, and gradually lost interest in politics after his retirement.

Manchester (and Reid's) biography of Churchill will stand for a long time as the definitive life of this bigger than life figure of the 20th century. While not as definitive as Martin Gilbert's six volume biography, Manchester should take its place on the library of any collection of Churchilliana.

John P. Rossi is Professor Emeritus of History at La Salle University in Philadelphia. He has recently written pieces on Pope Pius XII, a review of John Lukacs's *A Short History of the Twentieth Century* and an appreciation of George Orwell's 1953 *A Collection of Essays* that gained a broad audience in American for the Englishman's essays.