Winston Churchill by Leo Rosten

[1]HE LOOKED LIKE A TOBY JUG— but he was born to command, to fight, to inspire, to prevail. He lived with unquenchable gusto, drinking massive quantities of champagne, brandy, wine; puffing endless oversized cigars; working in bed until noon each day, undressing for a nap after a late lunch, resuming work until 3 or 4 a.m. He loved dashing hats and splashy uniforms, the trappings of heraldry and the panoply of kings.

[2]He was an anachronism—a monarchist, an imperialist, an Elizabethan thrown upon the stage of the 20th century, to be charged with nothing less than the salvation of Western civilization during the most hideous crisis in history. The Nazi *Wehrmacht* smashed across France and Africa and Russia, German planes and flying missiles turned London into a Gehenna, German submarines wrought horrible havoc among British ships and seamen; and this fearless, buoyant cherub, who might have stepped off a page of Dickens, talked of Honor, Duty, Valor—as if they were real; growled of Defiance, Fortitude, Glory-as if words mattered; sent his moral passion and rolling sentences across the very edge of chaos to lift the heart and galvanize the will of his proud "island race." This cartoonist's dream with the bowler hat and chubby-fingered "V" truly became, as the London *Times* said, "the largest human being of his time."

[3]He was often juvenile, flamboyant, petulant, exasperating, egotistic, a prima donna who monopolized conversation, nagged his colleagues, bullied hi staff, and employed every ploy—from temper tantrums to charm, cajolery to rage—"to soften the heart, move the emotions, and intimidate," wrote Dean Acheson. When he was forced to hear out others, said Aneurin Bevan, his parliamentary gadfly, he glowered "like a ferocious clam."

[4]Even those who opposed him found it impossible not to like him. After a quarrel, he was amiable, unbelievably considerate to, say, Chamberlain, whom he had excoriated and replaced. He could say even of the Germans: "My hate…died with their surrender."

[5]Churchill was as paradoxical as he was gifted: an aristocrat who loved nothing so much as the House of Commons, a polo player who quoted poetry, a warlord who painted for pleasure, a "reactionary" who was revolted by injustice or cruelty, a swashbuckler who was a glorious biographer with an uncanny sense of history—which he wrote like a master, casting himself in the starring role. As a young man, he had mused, "We are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glowworm." Scandal never touched his name. He married in 1908 and lived out a lifelong idyll of love.

[6]The dauntless warrior was unashamed of emotion. He always kept a picture of his Nanny in his bedroom. He described Hitler's savagery to Jews with tears rolling down his cheeks. During the Battle of Britain, he passed a queue of shivering shopgirls in the winter twilight, the air-raid sirens howling, and asked what the girls were lined up for. "Birdseed," said an aide. Churchill wept.

[7]Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill worshiped his father, Randolph, who treated him with brutal scorn, and adored his mother, the beautiful American, Jennie Jerome, whom he called his "Evening

Star." She gave birth to him in a servant's room, during a ball in Blenheim, the vast, resplendent palace the Marlboroughs called home, and hardly showered him with love thereafter. But nothing, not even childhood's heartbreaks, seemed to dismay the scion.

[8]The redheaded boy lisped and was a wretched student. His father thought him too stupid for the law or the ministry. He squeezed into Sandhurst, emerged a cavalry officer, pulled every wire to see the action he craved—in India and Africa. At Omdurman, he led a cavalry charge with drawn saber in an engagement that seems 500 years ago. He fought in six military campaigns before he was 26.

[9]When not soldiering, he reported war—sometimes combining both roles. Captured by the Boers, he made an intrepid escape—which he wrote up, to become world-famous at 25. He entered the House of Commons as a Tory, and in his maiden speech declared that, were he a Boer, he would be fighting England too. He earned his living as a journalist, an author, a lecturer.

[10]Churchill served in Parliament for half a century, under six monarchs, and held six Cabinet posts-yet left no legacy of legislation. He was a poor politician. He thrived on public life but was bored by party politics. Insensitive]to others, he never built a following, except for a small circle of admirers. Nor was he skillful in handling Parliament—except during war. Twice, he switched his party allegiance, a most heinous sin in English politics. He was despised by Labor, disowned by the Liberals, loathed by the Tories. The press lampooned him as a *poseur,* an opportunist, a reckless sword-rattler.

[11]In domestic affairs his record was dismal. Under Lloyd George, the one contemporary he unreservedly admired, he helped fashion England's first social-welfare legislation. He was compassionate, "betraying his class," but he looked foolish leading a police siege of a few anarchists in 1911, was wrong on Irish independence, unwisely pushed England back on the gold standard, acted badly in the General Strike of 1926. He naively supported Edward VIII in the abdication crisis, when his speech in Commons drew such boos and hisses, from the entire House, as had not been heard in those hallowed walls in 50 years. He was insular and narrow·minded on India. And when World War II ended, though idolized by Britain's people, he proved so unattuned to public opinion and social change that he was crushingly voted out of office.

[12]His military record is another matter. As First Lord of the Admiralty, he boldly converted the fleet to oil and modernized the navy before 1914. He was father of the Royal Air Force, and himself became a pilot as early as 1913. He hulled through a new weapon, which the army called "Winston's Folly": the tank. His scheme to force the Dardanelles in 1915 ended in the catastrophe of Gallipoli and his disgrace, but today, historians blame the disaster on the compounded blunders of others; the expedition could well have succeeded-to end the war sooner and prevent the Russian Bolsheviks from seizing power. Some call Churchill's Dardanelles scheme the most brilliant military idea of the First World War.

[13]As a strategist, he trusted intuition and innovation too much, hankered after "action" too often, badgered generals to distraction—but did not overrule the experts who vetoed his audacious but impossible stratagems.

[14]Churchill baffied his colleagues no less than his adversaries. Labeled as a warmonger he supported collective security (There is not much collective security in a flock of sheep on the way to

the butcher"). Hated as a "militarist," he hammered at the need to build strength into peace ("War, once cruel and magnificent, has become cruel and squalid"). From 1933 to 1939, he was derided for his "obsession" with an "exaggerated" German threat ("The flying peril is not a peril from which one can fly…we cannot move London; "It is better to be frightened now than killed hereafter"). And when England embraced euphoria over Chamberlain's deal with Hitler at Munich, Churchill blistered both the immorality and the illusion of "peace in our time."

[15]His very refusal to be political or expedient or sanguine made him precisely the man England, on the brink of defeat, needed. After the collapse of Poland, Norway and Denmark, with Belgium and Holland about to be lost and France near surrender, he became Prime Minister. Who but Churchill could have slept happily that night, feeling "a profound sense of relief"? "At last I had the authority to give directions over the whole scene. I felt as if…all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial…I was sure I should not fail. Therefore, although impatient for the morning, I slept soundly and had no need for cheering dreams. Facts are better than dreams."

[16]He had nothing to offer, he told the House, "but blood, toil, tears and sweat." (In 1921, he said the British are "the only people who…like to be told the worst.") His aim, he said, was simple: "Victory—victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival." And in one of the immortal passages of oratory and prose, he thundered, "We shall fight on the beaches…"

[17]For five years and three months, he wielded supreme power. He never prettified disasters: After Dunkirk, he dryly reminded men "wars are not won by evacuations." Of the Homeric feats of the RAF, he said, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." He persuaded England *not* to be influenced by the horrifying facts. He could be humorous in the midst of terror. As the *Luftwaffe* made London a charnel house, Churchill quipped that, "at the present rate," it would take the Nazis ten years to demolish half of London's houses: "After that, of course, progress would be much slower." Late at night, he would put the same record on the phonograph—a French band playing a military march—and stride back and forth to its beat, composing his shining phrases of hope and resolution.

[18]He was a poor debater, too slow, too ponderous, but no man surpassed him as an orator. "History itself seemed to come into that chamber and address us," said Bevan. "No one could have listened and not been moved." He could fling "a Union Jack over five tanks and get people to behave as though they had become 15."

[19]His words were worth battalions to the men and women who slept in subways night after night, to soldiers cursing Rommel on Africa's desert, to sailors dreading U-boat torpedoes. To all of them and the battered people of London, "Winston" typified more than English spunk: He *understood* war—and instructed men in war's awful requirements. He gave them a grammar of courage. He showed them *how* to be heroic: how to manage fear, how to invest despair with purpose—and anger with grandeur, how to wrap pain and death in nobility.

[20]He made every man feel a part of history, touched by glory. he spoke for the future with confidence, and men believed him. "In the hour when all but courage failed," said the London *Times,* "[he] made

courage conscious of itself, plumed it with defiance, and rendered it invincible."

[21]He was more than a spellbinder. Churchill had a clearer, harder, longer view of the future than Roosevelt—about the Russians, the Balkans, "the soft underbelly of the dragon," the inevitable postwar seesaw of power. And he illuminated his vision with phrases the mind could not shake off: "the deadly, drilled, docile, brutish masses of the Hun"; "[Hitler] liberated Austria from the horrors of self-government"; Russia "is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma"; "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning"; "iron curtain"; "talks at the summit." When a photographer said he hoped to photograph him on his hundredth birthday, 80-year-old Churchill grinned, "I don't see why not, young man. You look reasonably fit."

[22]He had the capacity to be sentimental without being maudlin, moral without being priggish, optimistic without being naive, patriotic without seeming parochial. He was a romantic of the utmost realism, a warmhearted advocate of *realpolitik.* He was that rarest of statesmen—the man who masters events, and the rarest of geniuses—a triumph of plain character.

[23]He died, like King David, "in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honour." For three days and nights, mourners passed the body that lay in state in Westminster Hall, over 320,000 of them.

[24]Then the leader was borne through the silent frieze of the streets in a bitter wind to the monotone beat of one drum, among all the kettles wrapped in black crepe, the figures behind in cloaks and plumes and equipage—scarlet, purple, gold—kings and ministers and princes of the East, to St. Paul's Cathedral, which had never seen such a rite. Then the coffin was borne on the Thames, where the iron spires of ship cranes bent half-down in awkward homage. It was all as Winston Churchill had himself planned it.

—LEO ROSTEN

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