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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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Essay by David Pryce-Jones

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF MARTIN GILBERT

A twelve-foot high statue of Winston Churchill has pride of place in the square facing the Westminster parliament. Set in bronze, Churchill’s heroic stance and bulldog expression take for granted that here on his own ground stands the prime minister who brought Britain through the Second World War, the gravest crisis in its history. None of the other politicians of the ‘30s, not even Josef Stalin, had the imagination and grasp to get the measure of Hitler. Isolated as he was, Churchill had only intellect and language to fall back on, until events were to prove him right. To give just one example, his statement in the House of Commons on the unfortunate Neville Chamberlain’s concession to Hitler in the Munich crisis of 1938 is forever final, and all in less than 20 words: “Britain and France had to choose between war and dishonour. They chose dishonour. They will have war.” Without Churchill, an English version of Vichy France might well have handed victory to Hitler with all its consequences.

But that was then, and this is now, when the British view themselves and their national achievements with more doubt than pride. On May 1, 2000, an especially red-letter day for the Left, an incident of no great importance in itself nevertheless illustrated how far perception of Churchill and his role had changed in the nation. A demonstration against capitalism passed through Westminster Square. One of the protesters climbed up the statue of Churchill and placed a strip of turf on its head. The media took delight in writing this up as “a green Mohican,” and publishing photographs to show this figure of fun. Brought before a magistrate, the man responsible turned out to be a 25-year-old ex-soldier who had served in Bosnia. In court he pleaded that he had been acting in support of human rights.

Holding at various times so many of the great offices of state, Churchill left behind him plenty of material for revisionists to work on. As Home Secretary, he had dealt with rioting Welsh coal-miners, and the Left was never to forgive or forget it, falsely claiming that he had called out the army to restore order. As First Lord of the Admiralty, he had responsibility for the naval operations at Gallipoli, the landing in 1915 designed to knock the Turks out of World War I but ending in disaster. Although a Commission of Inquiry absolved him of blame, the sense that he was reckless remained. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, he returned the country after the First War to the gold standard at its pre-war price. According to the experts, he had no choice in the matter, but accusations of ruinous incompetence lasted for years afterwards. And had he not dismissed Mahatma Gandhi as a seditious Middle Temple lawyer posing as a fakir? He had not become the king’s first minister, he growled, “in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire.” He took the side of King Edward VIII, afterwards the Duke of Windsor, only to have to threaten him with a court-martial for failing to do his duty in wartime.

As soon as World War II ended, moreover, the electorate showed its appreciation by voting him out of office. His successor, the socialist Clement Attlee, launched the lengthy ideological process of disconnecting the future of Britain from its past. In this contemporary perspective, Churchill is refigured as an arch-bogeyman, a class warrior, colonialist, imperialist, racist, begetter of the Cold War with his defiant evocation of the Iron Curtain dividing Europe. Again it was an incident of no great importance in itself when President Obama returned the bust of Churchill that Britain had presented to the White House, but it reveals a disdain for the man that the president evidently expected would prove popular with his constituency.

Martin Gilbert’s Monument

Churchill died exactly 50 years ago this January. In documentaries flushed out of the archives there was the chubby old man, with his trophy cigar, his bow tie and high hat, two fingers up in the
world-famous “V for Victory” sign. Articles and supplements in the media had a tone of excavating a figure from quite another world at quite another time. Martin Gilbert is the historian whose life’s work has been to establish just who Churchill was and what he had achieved. For generations to come, anyone weighing the great issues of the 20th century will have to take into account the mighty monument of an exemplary statesman that Martin Gilbert has erected. Too ill to leave the hospital and play his part, he died a few days after the anniversary of Churchill’s death.

The story goes that Churchill’s son Randolph was under contract to write his father’s official biography. Impulsive and self-indulgent, all his life Randolph had tried and failed to be a chip off the old block. Finding that the necessary research was beyond his capacity, he advertised for a qualified assistant. A fledgling Oxford don at the time, Gilbert responded, and Randolph had the sense or the good fortune to take him on. Randolph’s name is given as the author of the first two of the eight volumes of the official biography, but rumor at the time put it about that Gilbert may have been a helpful ghost towards the end of Randolph’s life. The remaining six volumes anyhow are exclusively Gilbert’s. Each is between a thousand and fifteen hundred pages long, weighing too many pounds to be handled easily. All have two and sometimes three companion volumes of similar bulk containing supporting documentation—that is to say, every scrap that Churchill wrote or spoke in speeches; relevant correspondence from colleagues, friends, military commanders, and officials, not to mention Stalin and Franklin Roosevelt; diaries; confidential cabinet papers; everything and anything that bears on the man and the moment. Road to Victory: 1941–1945, for instance, is Volume VII of the biography, covering four years, while its Companion Volume 17, just issued with the befitting title Testing Times, amplifies the narrative by providing all available material for the single year of 1942. This gigantic and unmatched publishing enterprise is in the hands of Hillsdale College, whose president, Larry P. Arnn (himself, at one time, a young assistant to Martin Gilbert), contributes a Foreword in a spirit of solidarity. And this is by no means all. In the course of his work, Gilbert has found time and energy to write other books concentrating on one or another selected aspect of Churchill’s life, for instance his leadership in the war, his relationships with the United States and with Israel, even the self-explanatory In Search of Churchill: A Historian’s Journey (1994). His central pre-occupation has broadened into histories in hundreds of pages of both world wars and the whole 20th century, no less.

Prime ministers’ biographies are a special branch of literature, requiring the narrative skill to bring alive the climb to the top of the greasy pole as well as the scholarly knowledge to set the politics of the day in proper context. Great biographies like Lord Morley’s The Life of William Ewart Gladstone (1903) or William Monypenny and George Buckle’s The Life of Benjamin Disraeli (1910–20) inform and make judgments, or to put it differently, they have found an indirect way of persuading the reader that it was right to have voted for this prime minister. The opening volume of Charles Moore’s biography, Margaret Thatcher: From Grantham to the Falklands (2013), is a showcase example of how an author can do justice to a career and at the same time put his own gloss on it.

Just the Facts

The mere existence of those massive volumes and even more massive companion volumes of course speaks to Gilbert’s wholehearted admiration of Churchill. But his concern is with facts, nothing but facts in chronological order; a restraint that gives priority to the archive and almost leaves no room for interpretation. Abstaining from praise and blame, indeed from anything that smacks of his own opinion, he gives the reader virtually no direction in making up his mind about the issues under discussion.

The purpose of writing history comes into question. Since Gibbon and Macaulay and Carlyle, the generally accepted view of historians has been that they have to educate and improve the public. The master historian Leopold von Ranke held the alternative view that the past should be represented wie es eigentlich war, as it really had been experienced by the participants. Derived exclusively from sources, history therefore has to be free from moral presuppositions, which in the case of most authors are closer to prejudice than judgment.

This doctrine casts a shadow over everything Martin Gilbert has written. Only 113 pages, Churchill’s Political Philosophy (1981) is his shortest book, consisting of lectures he delivered on behalf of the British Academy. Anyone led by that title to expect Martin Gilbert’s own commentary and analysis will find only a compendium of Churchill’s own observations abbreviated from the biography or its companion volumes. In contrast, William Manchester, John Lukacs, Roy Jenkins, and a few hundred more biographers write about Churchill for the evident purpose of illustrating aspects of his character or career of which they approve.

At this point I have to declare an interest. Martin and I arrived on the same autumn day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books by Martin Gilbert mentioned in this essay:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Churchill’s Political Philosophy. Oxford University Press, 199 pages, out-of-print</td>
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<tr>
<td>Servant of India. Longmans, 266 pages, out-of-print</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Appeasers. Houghton Mifflin, 444 pages, out-of-print</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plough My Own Furrow: The Life of Lord Allen of Hartwood. Longmans, 442 pages, out-of-print</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sir Horace Rumbold: Portrait of a Diplomat, 1869-1941. Heinemann, 496 pages, out-of-print</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exile and Return: The Struggle for a Jewish Homeland. J. B. Lippincott Company, 364 pages, out-of-print</td>
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<tr>
<td>Auschwitz and the Allies. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 368 pages, out-of-print</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War. Holt, 956 pages, $30 (paper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shcharansky: Hero of Our Time. Viking Adult, 488 pages, out-of-print</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Claremont Review of Books • Winter 2014/15
Page 65
IS GLOBALIZATION AN UNINTENDED RECIPE FOR WAR?

“James Macdonald presents a compelling thesis: Free trade and peace can prosper only under the protection of a single benign hegemon, and a multipolar world is unstable. This is a book of great scope and ambition, and one of the most important to be published in recent years.”
—Mervyn King, former governor of the Bank of England

“Contrary to the liberal dream, globalization does not lead to One World, but to disruption . . . In his grand sweep through history, James Macdonald makes a crucial point: The global commons does not organize itself; it needs a guardian and guarantor . . . With global conflict rising, the United States has begun to grasp Macdonald’s compelling logic: no protector, no peace. So the twenty-first century need not be a repeat of the twentieth. When Globalization Fails is a smart book that skewers the conventional wisdom.”
—Josef Joffe, senior fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University and author of The Myth of America’s Decline
those many years ago at Magdalen College, Oxford, where we were to read history. We had both done the national service obligatory at that time, I in the infantry, he in the Intelligence Service learning Russian as a conscript in the Cold War. The Oxford syllabus began with the Anglo-Saxons and stopped well short of the present. Our tutors provided reading lists for each week’s obligatory essay. K.B. McFarlane took us through the first thousand years of British history. A formidable medievalist, he preferred detail to the grand sweep. So high was his standard that he could hardly bring himself to publish anything, and his reputation rested on a long esoteric essay about a Lord Hastings and his indentured retinue at the end of the 15th century. All his pupils had to ask themselves whether this was perfectionism or sterility. He’d improvise topics for us to research, for instance communications in Roman Britain or the concept of honor in the Wars of the Roses, and then sit listening to us with an expression that signified his disapproval of ignorance. You ought to read a book by turning to the index and looking up anything you don’t know, was the advice of this exceptional example of the true Oxford scholar. Other historians in the college were John Stoye, of Yugoslav origins, author of a good book about the 1683 Ottoman siege of Vienna, and Karl Leyser, of German-Jewish origins, at that time delving into the obscure depths of the Dark Ages in Central Europe.

By the beginning of our second year, it was obvious that Martin was a born historian. Wasting no time, he already seemed able to extract from primary sources what he needed. A.J.P. Taylor was also a fellow of Magdalen. Conceited and querulous, he consented to have as pupils only the eight handpicked undergraduates who were thought to have the best prospects for a good degree and fame in the larger world. He himself was then a national figure on account of his lectures on television. Delivering them apparently impromptu without any hesitation, he had in fact written out and learned by heart what he would say. The prestigious position of Regius Professor of History was then open, and Taylor thought that he deserved to be chosen. He had difficulty putting a good face on it when his rival, Hugh Trevor-Roper, was appointed instead. For Taylor, the objective of historiography was to get your point across even if this was only for propaganda purposes, and it was naive of me to credit it. To portray Hitler as a politician like any other, as he does in The Origins of the Second World War (1961), is a typical example of his use of historiography for self-promotion. So low was his standard that he was quite ready to suppress or falsify detail for the sake of the grand sweep. He expected Martin to be his protégé, but Martin instead came to a more McFarlaneite conviction that the historian owes it to his subject to be completely knowledgeable and impersonal. Too polite to be anything but a reluctant polemicist, he later edited a collection of essays to give Taylor compliments he did not really feel.

Graduating, I soon found myself literary editor of Time and Tide, a weekly magazine then in the hands of Tim (afterwards Lord) Beaumont, heir to a fortune and at the same time a vicar in the Church of England. Find new talent, the editor instructed. I knew that Martin had started his career as a professional historian with an interest in imperial India, and particularly the Indian Civil Service. One of his earliest books, Servant of India (1966), was based on the diaries and correspondence of Sir James Dunlop Smith, private secretary to Lord Minto, the Viceroy at the beginning of the 20th century.

The reviews he wrote for Time and Tide were his first appearances in print. In one of them, dated July 27, 1961, he laid out the ground rules as he had learnt them at Oxford, with a split infinitive thrown in too: “It is necessary for the historian to continuously cross known ground, sift published materials, and search out new evidence.” The Appearers (1965), his first book, co-authored with Richard Gott (later unmasked by the defector Oleg Gordievsky as accepting money from the KGB), established what has become the received opinion that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and his clique were not Hitler’s match at the end of the ’30s. Martin was already working with Randolph Churchill when he wrote biographies of Lord Allen of Hurtwood and Sir Horace Rumbold, two very different characters who nonetheless typified the period between the wars. The former was a left-wing pacifist who had an interview with Hitler, and afterwards deceived himself to conclude, “His sincerity is tremendous….”

Martin Gilbert’s life’s work has established just who Churchill was and what he achieved.

I am convinced he genuinely desires peace.” The latter, on the other hand, had been British ambassador in Berlin from 1928 to 1933, and he had the foresight to warn his superiors that Hitler’s rise to power meant war.

Zionism

Staying on a semi-permanent basis with Randolph Churchill in his house in East Bergholt in Suffolk, Martin had a ready-made social life. Randolph one day took him to lunch at White’s Club, the haunt of Evelyn Waugh and immortalized as Bellamy’s in his trilogy, Sword of Honour (1952-61). Members of the British military mission to Yugoslavia in the war, Churchill and Waugh veered between being on the best of terms and the worst. One encounter that took place in the entrance of White’s has become a bit of British cultural history. In one version, Churchill’s guest that day was the well-known journalist Alan Brien, but in another version it was Martin. What exactly was said is also not clear. Converting experience into mischief in his usual style, Waugh afterwards complained to friends, “What did I do that Randolph hired a Jew to insult me in White’s?”

In Oxford days, Martin had told me with emotion how as a three-year-old Jewish boy at the outbreak of the war he had been sent on his own to Canada. Not Jewish, the woman who had him in charge took the trouble to learn to cook kosher for him, and wrote a weekly letter that she pretended came from his negligent mother on the far side of the Atlantic. In the family background was his uncle Leo Trepper, who had the kind of destiny most Jews experienced in one tragic form or another in the mid-20th century. Born in Poland, Trepper had emigrated to Mandated Palestine and become a Communist, only to return to Brussels at the outbreak of war in order to run the outstanding Soviet spy network known as die Rote Kapelle. It is an irony of historic proportions that Stalin disbelieved the network’s warning in June 1941 that the German army was about to invade. Many of Trepper’s agents were liquidated either by the Gestapo or the NKVD, then the acronym of the Soviet secret police, but Trepper himself was to survive years in the Lubyanka. He returned to Israel, and is buried there.

Spared these horrors, the British Jewish community had been in some sense privileged by Churchill’s defiance of Hitler. Tribute to Churchill is Martin’s point of departure for a dozen or so books about the contemporary Jewish experience and the central role in it played by Zionism, the movement that has recreated the Jews as a nation in the homeland of Israel.
Again I have to declare an interest: I used to see Martin when he was married to Susie Sacher, as thorough a researcher in the archives as he. The Sacher family, directors of the Marks and Spencer chain of supermarkets, had been lifelong Zionists and owned a house in Jerusalem. Martin took every opportunity to travel to Israel, and stay there for long spells of research. There's a tight circle of Israeli academics, writers, and diplomats with the intellect and the will to defend Zionism in times of war as well as peace, and Martin fitted easily into it.

Sympathy with the subject is obvious, but as with the books about Churchill he takes pains to describe events in the way Ranke specified, exactly as they had seemed to those living through them. The preface of Exile and Return (1978) opens with a statement that he is answering questions frequently asked about “the nature, the evolution, and the aims of Zionism.” Published three years later, Auschwitz and the Allies does verge on controversy. The Allied response to the Holocaust, he showed unmistakably, had been inadequate. Informed about the mass-murder being carried out at that extermination camp, Churchill exclaimed, “What can be done? What can be said?” He would have sanctioned bombing the railheads from which Jews were deported to their death, but bureaucratic indifference and obstruction put paid to any such plan.

In an unusual concession, Soviet Jews in principle during the ’70s had permission to emigrate to Israel. This issue affected relations with the United States; and Arab governments felt that the arrival of large numbers of educated Jews would further alter the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of Israel. Soviet indifference and obstruction operated to withhold exit visas from a number of hand-picked Jews, refuseniks as they were known. Here was a cause, a challenge, ready made for Martin, the Zionist and Russian speaker. The Jews of Hope (1984) is his only venture into journalism, at last a release of the self he so carefully screens out of his historical writing.

Nine hundred fifty pages long, The Holocaust (1985) is a chronicle excavated from the mass of documentation left by victims and victimizers. Commentary is superfluous. The facts speak for themselves. A year later, Martin published Shcharansky, subtitled Hero of Our Time, the biography of one of the most prominent dissidents and refuseniks, uncompromising even during his years in the Gulag. The book can only have helped him to reach Israel, where as Natan Sharansky—the Hebraized version of his name—he built his international reputation as a publicist of democracy, a Zionist, and eventually a government minister. Martin was in the habit of sending postcards to his friends with cryptic greetings from some forsaken Russian town where he was pursuing refuseniks. At some point, in a familiar tactic of the KGB to scare off opponents, he was detained at Moscow airport, taken aside, stripped to his underwear, and photographed, making an apt linkage to uncle Leo Trepper. Finest Hour, volume 6 in the Churchill biography, is dedicated to Yuly Kosharovsky and Aba Taratuta, “in friendship, and in hope.” The KGB reaction to the association of Churchill in 1940 with two trouble-making Soviet Jews is easy to imagine.

Israel: A History (1998) is a 750-page blockbuster intended to be the last word on the subject. However, Israel’s statehood is so contested at every stage that the exclusively source-based approach tends to begin and end in another rehearsal of well-known facts. Saul Bellow once observed memorably that Israel is “a sort of moral resort area,” in the same way that Switzerland is a winter sports area. Unlike Bellow or Walter Laqueur, another foremost historian of Zionism, Martin doesn’t do morals. What a corrective it is in these modernist times to have history told as objectively as possible and let morals speak for themselves.

And what persistence! What energy! Rightly rewarded, Martin could not help being enlisted into the establishment. Prime Minister Edward Heath asked him to record his term in Downing Street. Martin was allowed to sit in on much government business. No book came out of it, but the notes must be safely preserved somewhere for publication one day. Another prime minister, Sir John Major, rewarded him with a knighthood. Ronald Reagan sent Air Force One to fly him to Washington for consultation about the Soviet Jews. Queen Elizabeth questioned him about her Jewish subjects. Sir John Chilcot is a former civil servant appointed to head a committee inquiring into the origins of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and in particular whether Prime Minister Blair acted ultra vires, or “beyond the powers.” Martin was a leading member of that committee and was due to write up its finding. The last time I saw him he told me that the evidence suggested that Blair could not have taken any different decisions. Awarded a prestigious prize in Israel, Martin flew out there only to suffer a stroke from which there was no recovery. Sir Martin Gilbert C.B.E. was the heading on his writing paper and cards, the initials standing for Commander of the British Empire, but Conscientious, Brave, and Exceptional would do just as well.

David Pryce-Jones is a senior editor of National Review and the author, most recently, of Trea son of the Heart: From Thomas Paine to Kim Philby (Encounter Books).