



Churchill and the Thatcherites

by Stuart Reid

Forget Camillagate. It surprised no one. What could be more natural than for the heir to the throne and future Supreme Governor of the Church of England to be on richly intimate terms with his mistress? We are not living in the Dark Ages, for God's sake. No, the real surprise of the year so far has been John Charmley's revisionist life of Winston Churchill, in which the Great Warrior is judged and found wanting. According to Charmley, Churchill betrayed Britain's interests by selling us out to the Yanks, abandoning the Empire, and making safe the ways of socialism. He was capable, furthermore, of treating men's lives with "undue levity."

The Home Counties did not like this smarty-pants approach to the man who brought them their Finest Hour. Mock-Tudor roadhouses in Surrey rang with denunciations. The Cambridge historian and keeper of the Churchill Archives, Correlli Barnett, spoke indignantly of Charmley's "glib speculation." Less responsible elements reacted with ill-concealed glee. High tables groaned with delight; so did the news desks of the posher newspapers.

Charmley is not a conspiracy nut. He is a Thatcherite. Indeed, he is in some respects a model Thatcherite. He comes from a humble home, went to a state school, abandoned Methodism for Anglicanism, and now speaks with a plummy accent. He is, in other words, a member of England's aspiring class. At the moment, by happy irony, he is teaching history at Fulton, Missouri. His students there know him as a big, bearded Harris-Tweedy chap. Though only nine when Churchill died in 1965, he knows his subject intimately. He is a diligent

researcher, perhaps the only man alive who has read every one of Martin Gilbert's five million leaden words on Churchill. He likes to tease, but he is not a tease. He is a serious historian. Here is how, in *Churchill: The End of Glory*,¹ he sums up his case:

At the end of the war [Churchill] was, once again, faced with what looked like an attempt by one power to dominate the Continent, an odd result for so much expenditure of treasure and manpower. . . . [He] had nothing to offer the British people in 1945, and no one has been prepared seriously to argue that he did. . . .

Churchill stood for the British Empire, for British independence, and for an "anti-socialist" vision. By July 1945 the first of these was on the skids, the second dependent upon America and the third had vanished in a Labour election victory.

In Charmley's view, Churchill was not in the end a great war leader, because Britain conspicuously failed to win the war. The Soviet Union and the United States won the war; Britain merely avoided defeat. The policy of "unconditional surrender" was a mistake, says Charmley. Great Britain's interests would have been better served if Churchill had sought some sort of accommodation with the Germans—though not necessarily with Hitler. That would have freed Britain from the costly American alliance and might have saved the empire.

This thesis is not, of course, without interest, but, for all the hype and horror that attended the publication of *The End of Glory*, it is not

new. All the same, the smart papers treated the book as though it were not only new but daring and exciting and mold-breaking. Some mold, as Churchill might have said, some break. The fact is that revisionists have been doing brisk business these past thirty years and more. Even during the war there were skeptics and Churchill-bashers in Blighty. One thinks of Evelyn Waugh, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, and Malcolm Muggeridge. Especially of Muggeridge, who was convinced in 1939 that the war would have ruinous consequences. He had long believed that Bolshevism and National Socialism were twin evils. At the end of the war, in the ruins of Berlin, he asked himself whether what he saw represented the triumph of good over evil. He was pretty sure it did not. Nor was he ever keen on Churchill's "fraudulent rhetoric." When in 1950 he visited the old man on behalf of the *Daily Telegraph*, he was not impressed by the boiler-suited bonhomie. "[He was] flabby and puffy, and, in some indefinable way, obscene," he recalled in the first volume of his memoirs (1972); there was "something malign and disagreeable" about him. Perhaps, though, there is something a tad fraudulent about Muggeridge himself. The same meeting is recorded in respectful tones in his diaries. There we find Churchill "oddly lovable." The Sage of Robertsbridge was something of a ham.

Another ham (and mischief-maker), the socialist historian A.J.P. Taylor, famously maintained in *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961) that the war came about as the result of a series of misunderstandings, what we would today call a "failure of communication." Hitler, he said, was not contemplating general war in 1939, and probably not intending war at all. Over the years,

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¹ John Curtis/Hodder & Stoughton, 649 pages, £30.

Taylor's idea has been refined and recast. In 1989 Maurice Cowling, fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and sometime guru to young fogeys, argued, albeit in the equivocal voice, that Britain ought not have gone to war fifty years before:

Though the balance is a fine one, Russian (and American) domination of Europe after a long war, the destruction of Germany, and the emasculation of the British Empire were probably worse for Britain than German domination of Europe might have been if it had been effected without the emasculation of Empire.

Then there are the loonies, the men and women with annotated copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in their rucksacks. Sooner or later on the revisionists' road you are bound to make their acquaintance. Charmley is not one of their number. There is something to be said for his interpretation of the war. Who would deny, for example, that Yalta was Churchill's Munich? Yet there are times when Charmley's work, like the work of all revisionists, leaves one asking: So what? What was was; what is is. Revisionist history is a useful antidote to the sanitized and politically correct "propaganda of the victors." But there is paranoia in revisionist theory, at least as it applies in this country to World War II; an inability to come to terms with Britain's decline as an imperial power. The revisionists want to blame someone, and their tendency is to blame Churchill and his pal Roosevelt.

In fact, the empire was doomed long before the Atlantic Charter was signed and the special relationship with America sealed. The Dominion countries of Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa had been self-governing since the turn of the century (Canada since 1867) and were therefore hardly part of an empire in any traditional sense. They were not beholden to a metropolitan power. By the 1920s, furthermore, the Colonial Office was committed to "nativization," and by the 1930s Indian demands for independence were becoming irresistible. It was only a matter of time. The same is true of Attlee's socialist revolution. It was only a matter of time before Labour was returned to power.

However, if Britain had made a separate peace with Germany—the big if in the revisionists' game of "what if?"—the empire might have survived, and Attlee might have been denied power. In the controversy that followed the publication of Charmley's book, some unsentimental conservatives pointed out that in a Nazi-dominated Continent there would never have been a liberal consensus, which would have been bad news for anti-colonial elements in general and the Labour party in particular. But it would have been bad news too for the Tory party, not to mention the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and it would have left Britain a satrapy of Germany, a fate that even unsentimental conservatives might have found less congenial than the special relationship. Not every cloud has a silver lining.

Most critics have praised *The End of Glory* for its insights, with Thatcherite critics in the forefront. Not all Thatcherites go along with Charmley, however. One who does not is Lady Thatcher. She has a mystical reverence for "Winston," as she calls him. But she has none at all for empire. In her recently published *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*,² Shirley Robin Letwin notes:

[Thatcherism] is a vision of Britain as a country of dynamism, wealth and power, but unencumbered by either the trappings of a great empire, or the Victorian angst associated with a world half of which is colored red. For fifty years before Thatcherism, the Conservative party struggled with Britain's imperial heritage, never quite shaking off a belief in or at least a nostalgia for empire. Thatcherism, in its post-imperial modernity, has suffered no such hang-ups.

Yet many Thatcherites, often the best known and most articulate, are weighed down with imperial hangups. These are the conservative Thatcherites, the men who never had much time for Mrs. Thatcher's social and economic liberalism—"don't ask me about monetarism and all that," says Charmley—but were attracted to her because of the Falklands war, with its echoes of empire, and the anti-working class thrust of her labor policies. Alas, the glory days are gone.

²Now available in the U.S. from Transaction Publishers (377 pages, \$32.95).

There are no more Argies to waste or heads to crack. All that is left of Thatcherism, in the parliamentary Tory party at least, is privatization, meritocracy, John Major, and recession. Charmley's book is pure Thatcher in its anglocentricity, in its implied antipathy to foreign (i.e., European) entanglements, but it is heretical in its hostility to Churchill and its nostalgia for empire.

The true significance of *The End of Glory*, then, lies not in what it tells us about 1945 but in what it tells us about 1993. What it tells us is that Thatcherism is cracking up. The division over Churchill is only the latest sign. In the past year, Lady Thatcher and her conservative supporters have parted company over Bosnia (she is for military intervention, they are not) and Hong Kong (she is full of praise for Governor Chris Patten's attempts to extend democracy, they for the most part are not). At the same time, conservative Thatcherites are beginning to see Lady Thatcher's hand in the present difficulties of the monarchy. The baroness is not a republican, but her popular capitalism, her enthusiasm for the currency dealer with a satellite dish on his roof and a chip on his shoulder, did not strengthen the position of monarchy. And it is no coincidence, as they say, that the attacks on the crown have been fiercest in the newspapers she liked best (and which liked her best)—the Murdoch papers.

All that now unites Lady Thatcher and the conservative Thatcherites is Europe, or rather, opposition to Europe. In January the conservatives joined a motley band of crop-haired fascists and wacko socialists in a march on Downing Street in protest against Maastricht. It was a sad spectacle. A message from Mrs. Thatcher was read out in Trafalgar Square. Tony Benn (republican, leveler, formerly Lord Stansgate) gave a swivel-eyed speech. There were golf umbrellas and old country coats and plus-fours—and Doc Martens boots. It is impossible not to be reminded of the 1930s. Then too conservatives, socialists, and fascists were united in their opposition to European entanglements. They were also united in their opposition to Churchill. History does not repeat itself, but there is a fearful, and farcical, symmetry to it. □



Multicultural Instruction

by Thomas Sowell

Most of the arguments for so-called “multicultural” education are so flimsy, inconsistent, and downright silly that it is hard to imagine that they would have been taken seriously if they were not backed up by shrill rhetoric, character assassination, and the implied or open threat of organized disruption and violence on campus.

Let us examine the multiculturalists’ questions, one by one:

• *Why do we study Western civilization, to the neglect of other civilizations?*

Why is that question asked in English, rather than in some non-Western language? Because English is what we speak. Why do we concern ourselves with the Earth, which is an infinitesimal part of the known universe? Because that is where we live. If we want to understand the cultural and institutional world in which we carry on our daily lives, we need to understand the underlying rationale and the historical evolution of the way of life we have been born into.

None of this has anything to do with whether English is a better language than some other languages. English is in fact more inconsistent and less melodic than French, for example. But we speak English for the same practical reasons that cause people in China to speak Chinese. Attempts to turn this into an

Thomas Sowell's most recent book is Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, the Dogmas (The Free Press).

invidious comparisons issue miss the fundamental point that (1) languages exist to serve practical purposes and (2) they serve those purposes better, the more people in the same society speak the same language.

Why don't we study other civilizations equally? The most obvious answer is the 24-hour day and the limited number of days we spend in college. It is stretching things very thin to try to cover Western civilization in two semesters. Throw in a couple of other civilizations and you are just kidding yourself that you are educating anybody, when all that you are really doing is teaching them to accept superficiality. Those whose real agenda is propaganda are of course untroubled by such considerations.

Any suggestion that any aspect of

Western civilization has been admirable, or better in any way than the corresponding aspect of any other civilization, will of course be loudly denounced as showing bias instead of being “non-judgmental.” However, the one thing that no civilization has ever been is non-judgmental. Much of the advancement of the human race has occurred because people made the judgment that some things were not simply different from others, but better. Often this judgment was followed by abandoning one cultural feature and using the other instead.

We use Arabic numerals today, instead of Roman numerals, even though our civilization derived from Rome, and the Arabs themselves got these numerals from India. Arabic numerals (or Indian numerals) have displaced other numbering systems around the world because they are better—not just different. Paper, printing, and books are today essential aspects of Western civilization, but all three came out of China—and they have displaced parchment, scrolls, and other forms of preserving writings all around the world. Books are not just different, they are better—not just in my opinion, or in the opinion of Western civilization, but in the practice of people around the world who have had an opportunity to make the comparison. Firearms have likewise displaced bows and arrows wherever the two have come into competition.

Many of those who talk “non-judgmental” rhetoric out

