

The Company He Kept

Many of Churchill's countrymen were readier to do him harm than good.

EMINENT CHURCHILLIANS

By Andrew Roberts.
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By Gertrude Himmelfarb

TO commemorate the 50th anniversary of V-E Day last May, the British Education Department prepared a video to be distributed to all primary schools. The 34-minute video contained a single 14-second reference to Winston Churchill, a remark by a child: "People thought he helped the war end in Britain."

Andrew Roberts, writing in *The Daily Mail*, was outraged. This belittling of Churchill's role in the war, he protested, "is not just a misrepresentation. It is an insult." Yet several months earlier, when Mr. Roberts's own book "Eminent Churchillians" was published in England, he found himself in the company of Churchill's detractors, the revisionists, as they are called.

"Eminent Churchillians" obviously, and intentionally, echoes Lytton Strachey's "Eminent Victorians," which three-quarters of a century later still serves as the prototype of revisionism. Yet Mr. Roberts's title does not do him justice, for, unlike Strachey, he is a serious historian, and his book, amply documented and drawing upon a mass of archival material, is a genuine work of scholarship.

Nor does Mr. Roberts fit comfortably in the school of revisionism that discredits Churchill as the hero of the war and disparages the war itself, and more particularly the Battle of Britain. Certainly Mr. Roberts's revisionism is not that of John Charmley, whose "Churchill: The End of Glory," published a year and a half ago, takes as its hero not Churchill but Neville Chamberlain. Churchill, Mr. Charmley reasons, should have negotiated a peace settlement with Hitler in 1940, as Chamberlain attempted to do in 1939. Determined to destroy Nazism, Churchill succeeded in destroying the British Empire, establishing Socialism in Britain and aggrandizing the two enemies of Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States.

Unlike Mr. Charmley, Mr. Roberts is a resolute opponent of appeasement. One of the essays in this book is a sharp critique of George VI and his court, who were enthusiastically pro-Chamberlain before the war and, at least in the beginning, hostile to Churchill. Another is an equally sharp indictment of those Tories who waged "undeclared guerrilla warfare" against Churchill during the bitter months of the Battle of Britain.

The King and the dissident Tories, however, were not eminent Churchillians, as the title suggests, but eminent anti-Churchillians. Mr. Roberts explains that the title merely refers to those active in public life in "the Churchillian era" — the period between 1940 and 1955, "during which Churchill led the Conservative Party and, for nine years, the country." But "Churchill-ian era" is also misleading. For it includes the critical six-year period after the war when Clement Attlee and the Labor Government reshaped British history.

The longest essay in the book is a powerful indictment of the British withdrawal from India, which took place under Attlee's aegis. Indian independence, Mr. Roberts reluctantly concedes, was inevitable, but he says that the way it was achieved by Earl Mountbatten, Viceroy of India under the Labor Government, was disastrous. Thought to be influenced by his wife, who was sympathetic to Socialism and anticolonialism (and was reputed to be having an affair with Nehru), Mountbatten was blatantly partial to India and hostile to Pakistan. In his haste to turn over the Government to Nehru, he precipitously withdrew British troops from India, thus provoking the civil war and the massacre of hundreds of thousands. From the opposition benches Churchill denounced the failure of the British to keep

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Winston Churchill during his second Prime Ministry, 1953.

order and refused to speak to Mountbatten when he returned to England. Attlee, on other hand, was unrepentant. Years later he observed, in his usual laconic manner: "Broadly speaking the thing went off well, I think."

Only two of the essays are seriously critical of Churchill. The first is on Walter Monckton, Minister of Labor in Churchill's second Government in 1951-55, who had earlier supported Chamberlain's policy of appeasement toward Hitler and, later, according to Mr. Roberts, was "considered the ideal person to conduct Churchill's policy of appeasement toward the trade unions." Like Mountbatten, Monckton had flirted with Socialism, and although he later opposed nationalization, he was entirely willing to follow Churchill's "direct orders" to appease the unions.

This policy of domestic, not foreign, appeasement is the burden of Mr. Roberts's indictment of Churchill — and of all subsequent Conservative leaders with the notable exception of Margaret Thatcher. "Instead of treating it as the freak result it was, an entire generation of Tory politicians was emasculated by the 1945 election result, especially over the issues of nationalization, the growth of the state and trade union reform." Ceding the "intellectual high ground" to the collectivists, each Tory government preserved the leftist gains of the preceding Labor government, thus insuring the decline of the British economy as well as of the British Empire.

On one other subject, Mr. Roberts is harshly critical of Churchill, and it is this that has attracted most attention in England. Churchill, he tells us, was not only a racist; in a society where racist views were almost universal, he was "more profoundly racist than most." Mr. Roberts cites the ugly epithets Churchill used in private conversation — ethnic epithets as much as racial, since he was equally contemptuous of Africans, Indians, Germans, Italians, Arabs and Chinese. Mr. Roberts also reminds us that Churchill, like many eminent people at the time (indeed, Socialists more commonly than Conservatives), "dabbled" in eugenics before World War I. On the other hand, unlike most of his contemporaries, Churchill was well disposed to

Jews. In the eyes of some, Mr. Roberts wryly observes, his "philo-Semitism" redeems him from the charge of racism; for others it only confirms that charge, philo-Semitism being, they believe, only another form of racism.

The evidence of racism occupies only the first few pages of one essay. The rest of it is devoted to the "irony," as Mr. Roberts sees it, that in Churchill's second premiership Britain "took her first steps toward becoming a multiracial society" — a "maggie society," Churchill called it. This too is part of Mr. Roberts's indictment. But again, those first steps were taken not in the "Churchillian era," properly speaking, but by the Labor Government in 1948, when it passed the British Nationality Act, making Commonwealth citizenship equivalent to British citizenship, thus giving every citizen of the Commonwealth a legal right to reside in the United Kingdom. Mr. Roberts faults Churchill for failing to stem the tide of immigration when he returned to office in 1951. But this may suggest that he was less "profoundly" racist than Mr. Roberts says, that his racism was more a matter of rhetoric than of policy.

It is curious to find Churchillian revisionism, once the prerogative of the left (which has never forgiven Churchill his role in breaking the general strike in 1926), now emerging on the right. What unites the Conservative revisionists, in spite of their strong differences on appeasement, is the theme of "declinology," as Mr. Roberts felicitously terms it — the decline of British power at home as well as abroad.

The contemporary relevance of this theme explains the great attention this school has received in England. The European Union, bitterly opposed by these historians, revives memories of a lost national and imperial grandeur, and the Government of Mr. Major seems to them to be all the more ineffectual and anticlimactic in contrast to the vigorous stewardship of Lady Thatcher.

YET conservative revisionism antedates both the European Union and the reign of Lady Thatcher. It was 20 years ago, in "The Impact of Hitler," that Maurice Cowling defended Chamberlain's appeasement policy and took Churchill to task for starting the long period of decline marked by inflation, the dismantling of the Empire and a climate of opinion in which "the central features of Labor thinking became entrenched as normal." Mr. Charmley, and to a lesser extent Mr. Roberts, are the latest exemplars of this revisionist school of "declinology."

Not all of history, however, is revisionist. There are old truths to be reclaimed as well as new ones to be discovered, and old heroes to be revered, whatever their failings. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin, recently reminiscing about the war, paid tribute to Churchill, who "saved our lives, and he alone."

Long before the present wave of Churchillian revisionism, the distinguished English historian Geoffrey Elton, in his 1970 primer, "Political History," passed judgment on the belittling of great men:

"When I meet a historian who cannot think that there have been great men, great men moreover in politics, I feel myself in the presence of a bad historian; and there are times when I incline to judge all historians by their opinion of Winston Churchill — whether they can see that, no matter how much better the details, often damaging, of man and career become known, he still remains, quite simply, a great man." □