

■ A self-made scholar, Churchill is a distinguished political and military leader and the greatest British historian.

WINSTON CHURCHILL: STATESMAN AND HISTORIAN

Winston Churchill is, beyond all doubt, that statesman who became the greatest historian, and that historian who became the greatest statesman in the long annals of England. We do not say of him, had he not chosen to be a leading public figure he would have been a leading historian, for he was that, by every test. It is only because our gaze is fastened so continuously and so intensely on that career which has some claim to be the most splendid in two centuries of English history that we do not concentrate more on that career which has some claim to be regarded as the most affluent in modern historical literature.

It is the quality of Churchill's histories that assures them a permanent place in our literature, but the sheer bulk is no less impressive. What other major historian has written so much so well:

thirty two volumes (no less) of history and biography, and another twenty volumes of speeches which add a not negligible dimension to historical literature. If this prodigious output had been achieved at the expense of scholarly accuracy, critical acumen, or literary polish, we might dismiss it as interesting chiefly for what it told us about Churchill himself; but the books do not shine in a borrowed light, but with their own.

As with most great historians, Churchill was self-taught and self-trained. Certainly he had no formal education for a career as historian — indeed, it is accurate to say that he had no formal education for anything except soldiering — but his informal education was probably as good as that which any young man enjoyed in the whole of Victorian England. Born in Blenheim Pa-

lace, connected with all the first families of politics and society, he was familiar in all the best drawing rooms, even those of royalty. As a boy he had not only read history, but seen it in the making. "I can see myself . . . sitting a little boy," he said to the students of Harrow, "always feeling the glory of England and its history surrounding me and about me." Perhaps he did feel something of that at Harrow, but doubtless he felt even more of it in the spacious rooms and gardens of Blenheim, at the Vice Regal Lodge in Dublin, at the house on St. James's Place in London.

But even that was only the beginning. On distant Indian frontiers he immersed himself in history and philosophy. "All through the long, glittering, middle hours of the Indian day," he remembered, "from when we quitted stables till when the evening shadows proclaimed the hour of Polo, I devoured Gibbon." And not Gibbon alone, but Macaulay and Lecky and Hallam and, for good measure, Plato and Aristotle, too. "I approached it with an empty, hungry mind," he

added, "and with fairly strong jaws, and what I got, I bit."

Fame was the spur to this writing, as was necessity. Churchill had to make his way, he had to make his mark. The Army, for all its fascination, offered nothing permanent. Torn between journalism, history, and politics, Churchill therefore embraced all three, and made them one. For he was never content to sail but one sea at a time.

Most nearly autobiographical, and prophetic, too, was the first book that Churchill wrote: the novel *Savrola*. The central figure, *Savrola*, was a soldier who aspired to be a statesman, or a statesman who found that he had to be a soldier. He is in all likelihood, the greatest of military historians who wrote in English. Consider Churchill's claim to pre-eminence in this field. His first books were about wars-frontier skirmishes, to be sure, but that can be said of Parkman's histories, too; his *Marlborough* can bear comparison with Freeman's seven volumes on Lee and his lieutenants; his magisterial histo-

ries of two world wars are still the most comprehensive and scholarly in our literature.

He read history as a stupendous moral scripture, and for him the writing was, if not divinely inspired, at least authoritative. More, it was straightforward and simple. History was a struggle between the forces of right and wrong, freedom and tyranny, the future and the past. By great good fortune Churchill's own people — "this island race," as he called them — were on the side of right, progress, and enlightenment.

For all his familiarity with the peoples of every continent, Churchill was the most parochial of historians. He looked out upon the whole world, but he looked through British spectacles. All his life Churchill's eyes were dazzled by the glory of England, and all his writing was suffused by a sense of that

glory. He never forgot that it was the English tongue that was heard in Chicago and Vancouver, Johannesburg and Sydney, or that it was English law that was pronounced in Washington and Ottawa, Canberra and New Delhi, and English parliamentary governments that flourished in scores of nations on every continent.

Finally, Churchill's reading of history reinforced his early education to exalt the heroic virtues. He was Roman rather than Greek, and, as he admired the Roman accomplishments in law, government, and empire he rejoiced in the Roman virtues of order, justice, resoluteness, and magnanimity. Churchill cherished as a law of history the principle that a people who respect them will prosper and survive. — *By Henry Steele Commager, Excerpts from Saturday Review, May 18, 1968.*