

Wet Dreams About Winston Churchill

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Theme: [History](#)

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"I think [Winston] Churchill is one of the most dangerous men I have ever known." – Mackenzie King, Canadian PM to King George VI, June 1939

Yes, it is a little dirty – the sort of fantasy involving that childish destructive idea of being an imperial figure, an incorrigible traveller, and, at the end of the day, a warmonger who did a few nasty things to save a bad world from turning even worse. This is the central tenet of Winston Churchill, that he has been excused, used and apologised for with robotic repetitiveness, drawn upon as a historical oracle, that we are left wondering what, exactly, the man actually did.

That he presided over Britain during the dark years of the Second World War is fact. That he did so successfully cannot be contested, even if the victory came at the price of a diminished Britannia, with her lustre and lucre well and truly diminished. After 1945, Washington had its island aircraft carrier in the fight against the Soviet Union; Britain had the drug of nostalgia, one in which Spitfire-spiked Churchilliana would figure prominently.

That Churchill, however, finds refuge in a range of commemorative actions and performances, some of which seem ludicrously offbeat. It is almost a travesty that his image as prop has become irresistible. When struggling, when floundering, and when looking like an abject fool, resort to Churchill to boost the macho and stroke the mojo. This has clearly been the response of Australia's dense buffoon-in-chief, a prime minister who has shown himself to be ideologically impervious and pragmatically incapable. Struggling for suitable precedent and salvation, Tony Abbott feels that Churchill might offer tips.

On failings, yes. On disaster in war, yes. Those, however, are not the titbits of wisdom to be taken from the packed Churchillian resume – instead, it is the warmonger perseverance, orb and sceptre triumphalism, cigar chomping determination, which time and time again, quote scavengers resort to.

The Australian, a paper which has cooled to Abbott the stumbler, took note of his views on the British figure, and the fact that one of his paintings, *Cap D'Antibes*, is displayed in Abbott's office, a gift by Churchill to that insufferably Britannic appendage, Robert Menzies. The occasion was the 50 year anniversary of his death. "Mr. Abbott has been an avid reader of Churchill books" (*The Weekend Australian*, Jan 24).

If Abbott needs marks for fantasy, then he should get a few for reading Churchill's *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. Abbott also plugs *The Gathering Storm*, a worry given that any leader who speaks about reading the warring exploits of another is bound to be looking for tips. "He had a life of extraordinary interest and diversity; he was an orator without peer, a man of action as well as a deep thinker – and to this day; and for many generations to come, a leader worthy of the deepest study."

Perhaps it was the fact that much was done with little. Outclassed in virtually every department, Britain could still win a war that – and this is shaded with the collective conception of the “Allies” – the catastrophic toll of Soviet losses in the east, and the material provisions by the United States. Perhaps this is the lesson for the little figures of history – notably ones who would otherwise be vanquished by its uncompromising wheels.

The problem is, in many ways, that Churchillian wet dreamers plough historical recesses for inspiration, constantly living in a self-inflicted shadow. There was US President George W. Bush, who in 2001, was in search of stuffing for his ideological mission against fundamentalist Islam. This was also complicated by his struggle with the English language, which is to say, his only language. He had a loaned bronze bust of Churchill in the Oval office, courtesy of the British. And choice quotations. “The trick,” remarked *The Economist* (Nov 8, 2001), “seems to be working. In the past, Mr Bush frequently seemed to be engaged in battle with the English language. Since September 11, with Churchill’s help, he has recruited it into his grand coalition against terrorism.”

Indeed, many in the Bush administration started communing over a grand collective wet dream over the Briton as warrior and defender. Karl Rove, the president’s substitute brain, put up a poster in the Old Executive Office Building. Former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, with an almost molesting enthusiasm, quoted Churchill so much he earned the title of “Churchill in a Yankees cap”, while defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld was more selective: “Sometimes the truth is so precious it must be accompanied by a bodyguard of lies” (*The Telegraph*, Sep 27, 2001).[1] Truly fitting.

A bevy of British historians keep insisting on visiting and re-visiting Churchill, knowing what good value he is as a commodified, televisual product, or a sales pitch at publishers who should know better. “As an 18-year-old student,” remembers Max Hastings, “I remember standing amid the vast throng outside the Cathedral as Guardsmen bore the coffin up the steps from the gun carriage.”[2] The economy may not be thriving, Britain might have lost its spark, but Churchill is always there, a self-constructed (he did, also self-construct) myth that is, as Roland Barthes explained, supposedly unchangeable in its assumptions. Myths are contingencies and fabrications masquerading as infinite truths.

Historians like Hastings lament the almost aggressive American appropriation, a sneaking away of the British hero-leader who has followings in the US even as young Britain disbelieves. “In Britain, in contrast, polls show that many young people believe Churchill to have been a fictional character rather than a real one.” Even Churchill’s offspring are revered, the cult of vicarious worship. “Mary Soames, Churchill’s last surviving daughter who died last year, was constantly invited to visit America, to launch ships, and open museums. Across the Atlantic, she was everywhere feted as a near-goddess, which indeed she was.”

Australians should show greater ambivalence to Churchill, whose role behind the Dardanelles disaster as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1915 figures as a form of imperial betrayal, a butcher’s directive. The doyen of early Australian history, Charles Bean, prefers the tragic tone behind the futile slaughter of some 11,000 Australians and New Zealanders, collectively called Anzacs. “Through Churchill’s excess of imagination, a layman’s ignorance of artillery and the fatal power of a young enthusiasm to overpower older and slower brains, the tragedy of Gallipoli was born.”

Not so for such figures as Prime Minister Menzies, who fed off British praise and

conversations with Churchill like a desperate drunk in search for the next tippie. "Menzie's obsession with Churchill," notes Graham Freudenberg in the defining *Churchill and Australia*, "diminished his ability to assert his authority over his supporters." [3] And, it might be argued, many other matters.

There are those eternally grateful for Churchill's lethal blunder. Turning young Australasians into corpses at Gallipoli has been a damn fine thing for the Australian identity industry, one in search of a marketable legend and wars to march to. As Abbott's disposition to the leader attests, the quotable Churchill never goes to seed.

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Notes:

[1] www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/1357780/Churchill-spirit--inspires-Bush-and-Giuliani.html?mobile=basic

[2] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2924238/A-hero-unsurpassed-MAX-HASTINGS-says--live-shadow-flawed-colossus-Mail-prints-historic-tribute-editions-marking-50th-anniversary-Churchill-s-death.html>

[3] http://www.panmacmillan.com.au/display_title.asp?ISBN=9781405038706&Author=-Freudenberg,%20Graham

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