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# An Art of Translation: Churchill's Uses of Eighteenth-Century British History

Charles-Édouard Levillain

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- 1 Churchill spent his entire career thinking, speaking and writing as a historian. Although he never received any formal training in history and in fact recoiled from being considered as an academic historian (Churchill, *History*, I, Preface, viii), Churchill showed a natural appetite for the stories of great deeds and great men which, in his eyes, formed the very stuff of history (Addison 36). More than anything else, history writing provided Churchill with the means of producing a rolling commentary on his own life, where snapshot or grand scale biographies often intersected with autobiography. "Leaving the past to History" was one thing; another, as Churchill wrote in a draft note to Stalin in early 1944, "[was] to be one of the historians" (Reynolds 38).<sup>1</sup>
- 2 Much to his satisfaction, Churchill did become one of them, earning the respect of the finest academic historians of his age as well as the sincere admiration of a vast retinue of distinguished fans, far beyond the borders of the English-speaking world. "You are the greatest living master of English prose," Van Antwerp (Churchill's US asset manager) effused in November 1933 on receiving a signed copy of the opening volume of *The Life and Times of Marlborough*.<sup>2</sup> "I can say without the least flattery," the great eighteenth-century historian Lewis Namier concurred, less than a year after Hitler's accession to the German Chancellorship (1933), "that I have always been an admirer and follower of yours, and more now in view of the European situation than before."<sup>3</sup>
- 3 Churchill was the author of a considerable number of history books, the most substantial part of which was written and published between the late 1920s and the mid-1950s: *The World Crisis* (1923-31), *The Life and Times of Marlborough* (1933-38), *The Second World War* (1948-53) and *A History of the English-speaking Peoples*, a grand epic on the history of the British nation that Churchill began writing in late 1938, only

publishing the final version in 1956-58, after being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (1953).

- 4 Churchill attained a productivity peak between 1929 and 1939 when out of office, eagerly waiting for his political star to rise again, although as early as 1905, with no major historical work as yet under his belt, he was showing great promises. The Irish-born journalist and editor Franck Harris described Churchill's forthcoming two-volume biography of Lord Randolph Churchill as "a noble piece of work." Not only did it supersede Lord Rosebery's *Pitt* (1891) and John Morley's *Life of Gladstone* (1903); it was "a book which will be as Thucydides said of his own history 'a possession for ever' (κτῆμά τε ἔς αἰῶν);"<sup>4</sup> an exceptional work, in other words, that would set new standards in the historical profession.
- 5 Regarding the Randolph biography, Franck Harris' prediction may have been a little wide of the mark, but some of Churchill's other historical works did enjoy a huge success in their time, not least because Churchill could rightly be seen as both actor *and* narrator of the story he unrolled; a unique authorial status indeed that gave him considerable leeway in terms of interpretative framework. What, then, of pre-1900 history, when Churchill had not personally been involved in the events he recounted? And what of the long eighteenth century (1660-1815), when the basis of British world power was established? Oddly enough, this particular dimension of Churchill's work has been neglected in the existing literature. It is the aim of this essay to demonstrate that, beyond the special case of the Marlborough family connection, the eighteenth century offered Churchill a remarkable reading grid for many of his concerns with contemporary politics. The essay will begin by the broader issue of Churchill's awakening to history as a discipline and *ars literaria* before moving to the question of his uses of eighteenth-century British history in the context of the interwar period.

## Clio Unbound

- 6 Arguably, Churchill's thin academic credentials and belated self-instruction in history while a subaltern in Bangalore (1896-97) made him an "uneducated man" (Rose chap. 2 *passim*), or, at least, one who, unlike Franck Harris, had no Greek and very little Latin in what was a Golden Age for Classical Studies in Britain. Ancient history is largely absent from Churchill's historical work and whatever knowledge he had of Roman history he gleaned from Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-78), a favourite read under the burning sun of Bangalore and one Churchill remembered vividly enough to use as a rhetorical device in a wartime speech of 9 February 1941, commenting on the Lybian campaign as a sign of the "decline and fall of the Italian Empire" (*Great Speeches* 207). While the majority of Churchill's Oxbridge-educated fellow historians were steeped in Classics, the autodidact of 1896-97 embraced the ways of Clio without fully realising that the goddess of history was Greek; hence the regret he seemed to voice in a note of 1938 to the great Oxford historian Keith Feiling: "I wish I had studied history at the beginning of my life, instead of at the end."<sup>5</sup>
- 7 Should Churchill really have cared? History was a matter of instinct, informed by his childhood at Blenheim Castle and his first-hand experience of war and politics; in sum, a gut feeling driven by a desire to build a lasting monument to his own reputation – the same he built, in an act of filial piety, to honour the memory of his father Lord Randolph and his ancestor the Duke of Marlborough: two hugely controversial figures

whose legacy had left a scar on the Marlborough lineage. As Gladstone had sneered in a Table Talk of 1882: “There was never a Churchill from John of Marlborough down that had either morals or principles” (Foster 127).<sup>6</sup>

- 8 Family honour and personal reputation in an age of warfare: could anything come closer to the canons of ancient history, if not through the filter of academic knowledge, at least through the realization that Churchill’s historically constructed Self reached beyond the boundaries of time and space? The great Oxford historian Keith Feiling called it “the Thucydides parallel.” No one could write history like Churchill because, in Feiling’s admiring words, the descendant of Marlborough “lived in and made events equal in terror and passion to those in which Thucydides was engaged.”<sup>7</sup>
- 9 History was not just for history books, read, written or quoted; for Churchill, it was a way of life, a mental framework into which he fitted his own particular understanding of national and international politics. One might add: history writing, at least until May 1940, was the “toil” without the “blood” and the “sweat” without the “tears.” Then came, with the Battle of Britain, the highest point of Churchill’s career: the commander-in-chief’s own (unconscious) re-enactment of the history of the Peloponnesian wars: “walking with destiny” (Churchill, *Second World War I*, 601); embodying Britain’s unflagging spirit of resistance to tyranny; lifting up the morale of the nation; reaching out to Britain’s American brethren and coordinating a broad international alliance against Nazi Germany.
- 10 For all of these reasons, the standard assumption is that Churchill’s uses of history—be it in his wartime speeches or in his historical works—were emphatically, if not exclusively, political (Ashley 12). Churchillian history, from this perspective, sounds very much like the continuation of politics by other means. And one has to admit that there was no safer way of inflecting the judgement of history in the contentious Gallipoli case of 1915 than to offer one’s own version of the facts, as Churchill did with meticulous detail in volume II of *The World Crisis* (1923).

## The Sword and the Word

- 11 “Swords are not the only weapons in the world,” Churchill had claimed in a 1899 article written during the Second Boer War (1899-1902), “something may be done with a pen” (*Morning Post*, 22 December 1899, in *Boer War* 71). This whole idea of a subservience of history writing to the requirements of an erratic political career that appeared to be doomed in the 1930s makes sense, but it needs to be qualified. Recent scholarship on Churchill’s historical work has gone a long way towards exploring the remarkable organisation behind the writing of *The Second World War* and *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.<sup>8</sup>
- 12 True, in both cases, Churchill mobilised just about the best available human resources on the market of academic history writing, freeing himself to dictate a draft that was then converted into book form, carefully edited, published and finally marketed with genuine business acumen. True, Churchill was more than happy to take from his publishers all the money he could get to maintain a lavish lifestyle commensurate with his aristocratic pedigree. According to David Reynolds’ estimates, Churchill made a small fortune out of the sales of *The Second World War*—between 18 and 50 million dollars tax free (Reynolds xxii).

- 13 But do we have to take the cynical view that the “Churchill Teams” behind so many of his works were – to paraphrase the wartime speech of 9 February 1941 – merely giving him the “tools to finish the job” (*Great Speeches* 213), the “job” consisting of the historicisation of any subject-matter that might feed into the story of a hyperbolic Churchillian Self? The answer is no. Churchill was too rich and complex a personality for every literary achievement of his to be construed in the light of an otherwise unabashed political ambition. Even if there was virtually no escaping the allurements of power, one should see Churchill as an artist whose ability to collapse “the distinction between theatre and reality” (Rose 17) and to weave past, present and future into a coherent narrative were geared towards a literary purpose: the writing of some sort of equivalent to Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, where history served as an enquiry into the hidden recesses of human nature.
- 14 Frederick Lindermann (Churchill’s faithful friend and scientific adviser) was once commissioned to dig out a Plutarch reference. One of the quotes that caught his eye was a colourful dialogue between Pompadeius Silo and Marius. “If you are a great general, Marius, come down and fight,” to which Marius replied, “if you are a great general, make me fight against my will.”<sup>9</sup> One could argue that while Churchill did love putting up a good fight, either on the battlefields of Britain’s remote imperial borders or the arena of Westminster politics, there was no greater test of force than the writing of his own version of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*. Let us call them the *Parallel Lives* of Churchill.
- 15 A follow-up question immediately springs to mind: did this add up to a philosophy of history? “I should say,” Churchill wrote to his mother in a touchingly candid letter of 1896, “that I often yield to the temptation of adapting my facts to my phrases.” “But,” Churchill added rather unapologetically, “Macaulay is an arch offender in this respect.”<sup>10</sup> “My facts”: Churchill intended something different from *the* facts, whatever that may have meant to an offspring of the late Victorian period whose historical judgement remained somewhat impervious to the academic controversies of his age over the role of source criticism and the search for Leopold von Ranke’s “essence of History” (Bentley 14). Hence Churchill’s tendency to read more into the sources than there was and to bend the facts in accordance with a pre-ordained intellectual design (Liddell Hart 703; Ashley 18).

## “A tapestry of kings and wars” (Deakin)

- 16 According to William Deakin (one of Churchill’s main research assistants in the 1930s), Churchillian history writing could be described as “a Renaissance pageant, woven in a tapestry of kings and wars, of high adventure and exploration across the seas” (Deakin 14). In 1898, Lord Acton had made a case for a scientific analysis of the defining moments of Britain’s national history: “Our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, German and Dutch alike” (Acton 249). Churchill would not have agreed, at least not in the dramatic circumstances of 1940-41, when fortress Britain and its Empire were besieged on all sides. The story Churchill had to tell in his BBC broadcasts was far remote from Acton’s dream of archival impartiality. The beleaguered British people reminded Churchill of “the British squares at Waterloo.” Forget about General von Blücher’s timely arrival on the Waterloo battlefield on 18 June 1814; forget about the Anglo-Prussian joint venture that had carried the day against Napoleon. Waterloo, by

Churchillian standards, emphatically remained a British story, a culminating point in the rise to great power initiated under the leadership of the Duke of Marlborough at the battle of Blenheim (1704).

- 17 In his eighteenth-century portrait gallery, Churchill did have his favourite heroes, all of whom were given a worthy role in the *dramatis personae* of the wartime speeches: Marlborough, the victor of Blenheim, unjustly felled in 1710 by the menial intrigues of his Tory rivals; William Pitt the Elder, the founder of the British Empire, “a born actor” who “was to rekindle the national sentiment of the English” and whose “splendid eloquence” enthralled the House of Commons (*History II*, 112-14); Nelson, the hero of Trafalgar (1805), whose “maxim”, Churchill claimed in the midst of the Battle of Britain, was never more appropriate: “our first line of defence is the enemy ports” (*Great Speeches*, 20 August 1940, 185); Pitt the Younger who, “with all his defects” and all the criticism he incurred, “stood high above his contemporaries” (*History II*, 241); and Wellington, of course, whose noblest virtue, in the eyes of Churchill, had been to replicate in the Low Countries the deeds of the great man: the Duke of Marlborough, again and again (*History II*, 306).
- 18 Marlborough remained Marlborough, the victor of Blenheim, but the stain and the sting had never gone away. It took Churchill some two million words to dismiss the standard charges of treason and peculation Macaulay had attached to Marlborough’s otherwise decisive contribution to the War of the Spanish Succession. Some of Churchill’s shrewdest readers, like the newspaper editor and journalist James Louis Garvin were convinced: “You have had a splendid reception,” Garvin wrote in October 1933, on receiving a copy of volume I of *The Life & Times of Marlborough*, “and Macaulay will never recover.”<sup>11</sup> As Churchill worked his way into the notes of his research assistants, the eighteenth century gradually became the terrain of a sort of one-to-one struggle with the ghost of Macaulay. Macaulay had presented what Churchill bluntly called an “odious portrait to posterity” (*History Preface*, 6) which *The Life & Times of Marlborough* had passionately sought to redress.
- 19 As the Countess of Jersey rather humorously wrote to Churchill in December 1933: “May I thank you for the enjoyment which I had in your ‘Marlborough’. I think that you and Macaulay will have a lively encounter in the Elysean field.”<sup>12</sup> Churchill did have a natural propensity to write in the colourful style of Macaulay but, in terms of substance, eighteenth-century British history also gave him ample opportunity to engage with his own contemporaries—historians or politicians. Churchill, in other words, kept the style of narrative history, but only to chip away at established interpretations, as if he were only accidentally a scholar. Churchill, by nature, was a trend-maker and leading from behind – from behind Macaulay – was not his thing.
- 20 Did this make, however empirically, a philosophy of history and did Churchill’s Parallel Lives as historian and politician have a special flavour, something that set them apart from mainstream political culture? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that, in the exceptional circumstances of 1940-45, Churchill’s belief in the continuity of some key material and psychological factors was underpinned by a sense of national purpose encapsulated in the word “victory”: “victory at all costs,” he argued in the House of Commons on 13 May 1940, as Hitler’s Panzers had already swarmed across the French Ardennes’ defence line (*Great Speeches* 13 May 1940, 149). But the reason why the many historical references that sprinkled Churchill’s oratory touched such a sensitive chord is precisely because, on the receiving side, British history remained a subject of intense

discussion and curiosity (Plumb 63-77), percolating into parliamentary debates in a way for which there was no equivalent in the democracies of the continent.

## Phantoms of History

- 21 The sceptics, like Sir James Headlam-Morley, had claimed that “one of the diseases which Europe suffers is the accumulated memory of the past” (4). The Germans had never recovered from the Versailles treaty (1919) hang-over and, partly under the impulse of a strongly nationalistic historiography in the late nineteenth century, they were still seeking moral reparation for the sacking of the Palatinate by French troops in 1689-1690. At the dawn of his long career, Bismarck, the founder of the German state, had confessed that the memory of the events of 1689-1690 had fuelled his desire for “war” and “revenge” against the French in the 1860s (XV, 6). “War” and “revenge” after the trauma of 1919: Hitler had nothing else in mind. Was the past doomed to haunt the present?
- 22 One had to agree that “no nation can afford to neglect its own history”<sup>13</sup> and that Churchill’s eighteenth-century portrait gallery was one of the liveliest parts of Britain’s memorial heritage. There was every reason for foreign diplomats to be awe-struck by Churchill’s “broad knowledge of history”<sup>14</sup> but it would be a mistake to infer that Churchill held a position of monopoly among his fellow parliamentarians. It is no exaggeration to say that many interwar public figures shared an appetite for the eighteenth century and an awareness of its singular value for better understanding the world they lived in. The mental oscillations between eighteenth and twentieth centuries might be described as an “Art of Translation” (*translatio*), in the sense of a collapsing of otherwise discontinuous timelines. Churchill described it as a journey through time: “travel[ling] back from the twentieth century into the eighteenth century,”<sup>15</sup> as he suggested to the Dutch Prime Minister Colijn in 1938. Colouring the twentieth century in eighteenth-century hues (or vice versa) should not be dismissed as a rhetorical posture; rather, it helped fathom the deep sense of a particular historical event. As Neville Chamberlain wrote to Churchill on receiving a signed copy of volume IV of *The Life & Times of Marlborough*: “Your inscription is appropriate though perhaps if I were translated to the eighteenth century, I might think it was not better than the century in which I find myself.”<sup>16</sup>
- 23 In the strained context of the Munich Treaty negotiations, Pitt the Younger (rather than Marlborough) seems to have been one of Chamberlain’s favourite eighteenth-century heroes. When, only a few weeks after the signing of the fateful Treaty of Munich of September 1938, Chamberlain quoted from William Pitt to declare that “no nation” was doomed “to be unalterably the enemy of another” (House of Commons Debates, 6 October 1938, volume 339, 550), the reference did not pass unnoticed. “We are told,” the Dutch Ambassador commented on the basis of Downing Street’s briefing, “that the PM’s recent speech in which he likened himself to Pitt should be read literally. In certain circumstances, Mr. Chamberlain will not hesitate to lead the country to war.”<sup>17</sup> That was a soothing interpretation to a Dutchman who hoped the Low Countries might still be regarded as “an English glacis” by Nazi Germany.<sup>18</sup>
- 24 This, however, remained only one strand of interpretation, explaining why the Pitt quote fuelled much controversy in the House of Commons. “We are delighted,” Albert Alexander quipped on 19 December 1938, “to listen to the periods of a great Tory



- statesman like William Pitt, but it is a pity that the Tory party have to go so far back to find a great statesman” (House of Commons Debates, volume 342, 19 December 1938, 2606). Clement Attlee took an ever harsher view of Chamberlain’s grasp of late eighteenth-century history: “I suggest that William Pitt, to whom the PM referred in his speech the other day, hardly ever, if ever – I think never – took that line” (House of Commons Debates, volume 343, 31 January 1939, 69).
- 25 The Pitt-Chamberlain conflation, in other words, made little sense and the Dutch ambassador had been led astray in thinking that Chamberlain would leap to the defence of the Low Countries in the event of a German attack. Chamberlain remained the man of Munich, an opinion follower rather than an opinion maker, with only a tenuous understanding of international politics.<sup>19</sup> Better take one’s cue, according to Sir Derrick Gunston, from another famous wartime speech by Pitt (1793): “War, whenever it comes, will be preferable to peace without honour, without security” (House of Commons Debates, volume 342, 19 December 1938, 2606).<sup>20</sup>
- 26 Churchill could not have agreed more. Honour was his obsession, security his constant preoccupation. “A peace without honour,” along the lines of the Utrecht treaty (1713), was a recipe for disaster, breeding ill-feeling among Britain’s allies. It had been Gladstone’s point that the “treaty itself” had brought about major commercial advantages but that “the abandonment of Prince Eugene and the allies” had been a “disgraceful” move on the part of the Tories.<sup>21</sup> When writing to the Dutch Prime Minister Colijn in January 1937, Churchill apologised in a statesman-like attitude on behalf of the British nation: “You will find I shall not spare my own country for the shameful desertion of the Grand Alliance which led to the treaty of Utrecht.”<sup>22</sup>
- 27 Harley and Bolingbroke – Marlborough’s Tory enemies – had engaged in underhand negotiations with Louis XIV’s agents, effectively pulling Britain out of the Grand Alliance with Holland and Austria to clinch a separate peace with France. When completing volume IV of *The Life and Times of Marlborough* in the summer 1938, Churchill certainly lived up to his promise: “Nothing in the history of civilized peoples has surpassed this black treachery” (*Life and Times of Marlborough* IV, 945).
- 28 The Dutch, in fact, had not forgotten. In his preface to a monograph of 1930 called *The Dutch Barrier 1705-19*, the great Dutch historian Pieter Geyl – the first holder of the chair of Dutch history at the University of London – referred to “the careful treachery with which the Tory government made their private arrangement with the common enemy” (Geikie and Montgomery, Preface, 7). Maurice Ashley’s combing of Dutch State Papers in The Hague may have left some loopholes in people’s understanding of Marlborough’s campaigns in the Low Countries,<sup>23</sup> but Churchill’s sincere adherence to the value of the Anglo-Dutch alliance did touch a deep chord in the Netherlands.<sup>24</sup>
- 29 The “men of Utrecht,” as Churchill scornfully called Harley and Bolingbroke, “were the men who had betrayed the allied cause” (*Life and Times of Marlborough* IV, 1019). Even Keith Feiling, the historian of the Tory Party, agreed with Churchill: “Personally I agree with your low view of Bolingbroke, and think, with some severities of phrase, you have done Harley fair justice.”<sup>25</sup> In 1713-14, Harley and Bolingbroke had abandoned the Dutch, the Austrians and the Catalans, who had been left to their own devices during the siege of Barcelona (1714). In the fall of 1938, it was the Czechs who were to suffer the stigma of non-intervention and cold diplomatic prudence. “How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is,” Chamberlain boasted in an infamous BBC broadcast on 27 September 1938, “we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks because of a quarrel in a

far-away country between people of whom we know nothing" (Chamberlain 274). With the benefit of hindsight, the "men of Utrecht" could indeed be seen as the forerunners of the "Guilty Men" of 1940.<sup>26</sup> "How like the Tory party of those days our present lot is!"

<sup>27</sup> Churchill had opined a few months ahead of the Munich crisis of 1938.

- 30 Remarkably enough, some of Churchill's most assiduous readers concurred with the idea of an overlap between past and present. George Trevelyan, great nephew of Macaulay, guardian of the temple of Whig historiography and then Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, agreed that "most of the Tories of the present day seem uncommonly like their predecessors. *The Daily Express* is a lively descendant of *The Examiner*, without of course the malicious genius of Swift behind it."<sup>28</sup> Along similar lines, Edward Marsh (Churchill's long-serving secretary) had made the following suggestion on reading the proofs of *The Life and Times of Marlborough*: "I hope it will bring home to modern readers the life and drama of that great age. How like their forerunners the modern Tories are!"<sup>29</sup>
- 31 But the most telling comment came from Anthony Eden in March 1938, only one month after his resignation from the Foreign Office. Eden had resigned as a result of a rift with Chamberlain over the conduct of foreign policy with regard to Italy – Eden opposed the *de jure* recognition of the Italian position in Abyssinia, favouring Anglo-American cooperation over a dubious piecemeal settlement.<sup>30</sup> After February 1938, he was to join the near-empty ranks of anti-appeasers, embracing Churchill's crusade against German claims for a "*Lebensraum*".
- 32 Eden obviously took an interest in the presentist spin of Churchill's historical endeavours. "It occurred to me," Eden opined, "that you would be amused to see what rascals the Tories were at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Of course it is all quite different now. I had some fun with them nevertheless the other day." The "other day" may have referred to the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 1938, when he argued in the House of Commons that "there are occasions when strong political convictions must override all other considerations."<sup>31</sup> Eden's Tory "rascals" assumed, in Churchill's words, the shameful name of the "men of Utrecht." History, by Churchillian standards, was not necessarily the linear story so dear to the Whig historians of the late Victorian period, but it was clearly judgemental, drawing the line between villains and heroes and dishing out moral rewards and penalties.

## The Pitt Parallel

- 33 What, then, can further be said of the Pitt parallel? Of course, it was bound to be overshadowed by the Marlborough paradigm, but it remained a powerfully suggestive precedent for rallying the British nation against Nazi Germany. No sooner had Churchill completed his four-volume *opus magnum* on Marlborough in August 1938 than he launched into his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* project. By the beginning of the war in September 1939, he had written no less than 530,000 words. G.M. Young (one of Churchill's assistants) was given instructions to lay more emphasis on Pitt the Elder although Pitt the Younger, to whom Chamberlain had made this slippery reference in October 1938, figured no less prominently in Churchill's understanding of the state of Britain's pre-1940 defences.
- 34 Could there be no sweeter tune to sing for Churchill to live up to the challenge Arthur Godley (Under Secretary of State at the India Office between 1883 and 1909 and a Greek

scholar) had set in 1905 on reading the biography of Lord Randolph? Godley had suggested that Churchill take his cue from a Greek proverb Demosthenes had used in one of his speeches: "High office will show (or reveal) what a man really is."<sup>32</sup> High office had indeed revealed what sort of stuff Pitt the Younger was made of: not Chamberlain's advocate of peace and reconciliation—although Pitt, to be fair, had endorsed the rather unfavourable terms of the Amiens Treaty of 1802—but the citizen-soldier waiting for the call of destiny from his Kent retreat at Walmer Castle – only eighty miles from the estate where Chartwell was later to be built. This was Churchill's version of the ex-Prime Minister raising a corps of Cinque Ports Volunteers as the threat of French invasion was looming large:

Few things in England's history are more remarkable than this picture of an ex-Prime Minister riding a horse at the head of motley company of yokels, drilling on the fields of the South coast, while a bare twenty miles across the Channel, the Grand Army of Napoleon waited only for a fair wind and a clear passage. (*History II*, 241)

- 35 This Pittite spin resonated in some of the important speeches of 1940, wedding past and present: on 4 June, two weeks ahead of the French capitulation, when Churchill reminded his audience how Napoleon had lain "at Boulogne for a year with this flat-bottomed bots and his Grand Army," warned by someone that "there are bitter weeds in England" (*Great Speeches*, 4 June 1940, 163). "We shall defend our island," was the Prime Minister's pledge to the British nation (*Great Speeches*, 4 June 1940, 165). A pledge he held, steering the country to victory before losing the General Election to the Labour party in July 1945. The wound must have been a deep one, but Churchill knew for a fact that he had already gone down in history. Three days after the German capitulation, on 11 May 1945, Churchill's publisher George Harrap had these words of flattery to celebrate the Prime Minister's wartime achievements: "The glory of your ancestor [Marlborough] is now overshadowed by your greatness and by the historical fact that you will be remembered by the world in the centuries to come as a real human shield to civilization."<sup>33</sup>

## Churchill's kingdom

- 36 One remembers the youthful Churchill of 1896 writing to his mother about the "temptation of adapting my facts to my phrases."<sup>34</sup> "My facts", half a century on, had mutated into "a historical fact" (in the words of George Harrap), as if the microcosm of Churchill's Blenheim chrysalis had now reached its full bloom, blending in with the macrocosm of the wide world outside. With all their mawkish sentimentalism, Harrap's words deserve to be taken seriously: in 1945, Churchill had become a world in himself, a province to the history of Britain and Europe.
- 37 Churchill may not have had a proper philosophy of history, in the sense of an organising conceptual framework, but the wealth of historical references in his oratory and the passion with which he engaged with the historians of his age (both amateur and professional) still make of him a unique figure in Europe, somewhere at the crossroads of mainstream history, literature and political science. "Soyez notre Demosthène," Sandra Lytton anxiously begged in May 1940 as a German invasion of Britain seemed imminent.<sup>35</sup> Churchill did become Britain's Domesthenes in 1940,

wielding “a power more durable than that of a great king” and becoming “an independent force in the world.”<sup>36</sup> Oratory gave Churchill a crown; history a kingdom.

- 38 Was there, to conclude, a particular Churchillian vision of the eighteenth century? Let it be clear that Churchill does not say much about the humble folks. Churchill’s long eighteenth century remains deeply aristocratic, even though he was deft enough to remind his American audience in a speech to a Joint Session of Congress in December 1941 that he had always remained a commoner—as Pitt the Elder had been until 1766, “a child of the House of Commons,” where, as he later explained in his Fulton speech of March 1946, he received “a large part of his education in politics, dialectic, rhetoric and *one or two other things*.”<sup>37</sup>
- 39 “One or two other things”: history certainly counted as one of them. Admittedly, there was little room for social history in Churchill’s long eighteenth century; little room, in other words, for the push-and-pull of class struggle despite Churchill’s own commitment to social reform as a liberal minister under Lloyd George after 1904. Even the Industrial Revolution, the motor of economic and social change in eighteenth-century Britain, is pushed to the margins of Churchill’s vision of an expanding British Empire. For Churchill, eighteenth-century British history remained a history of warfare dominated by great men and great deeds. “What a virile and magnificent age it was!” effused Churchill in 1938.<sup>38</sup>

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## NOTES

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2. CHAR 8/326, Van Antwerp to Churchill, 23 November 1933, fo.114.
3. CHAR 8/326, Namier to Churchill, 15 December 1933, fo.83. Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January 1933. For a recent biography of Namier and some insights into the Churchill/Namier connection, see Hayton.
4. CHAR 8/21, Harris to Churchill, 7 October 1905, fo.3. For the Thucydides reference, see *Thucydides historiae* (I, 22, 4).
5. CHAR 8/595, Churchill to Feiling, 26 February 1938, fo.76.
6. I owe this reference to David Cannadine.
7. CHAR 8/307, Feiling to Churchill, 24 August 1932, fo.102.
8. See Reynolds as well as Clarke.
9. CHAR 8/44, Lindemann to Churchill, 18 May 1923, fo.84. For the Plutarch quote, see *Life of Marius* 555.
10. CHAR 28/25/6-8, Churchill to Lady Randolph, 16 May 1896.
11. CHAR 8/326, Garvin to Churchill, 9 October 1933, fo.46.
12. CHAR 8/325, Countess of Jersey to Churchill, 14 December 1933, fo.131.
13. TNA, FO 371/19880, C 3811/92/62, *England and the Low Countries. A Historical Survey*, fo.63v.
14. Nantes, Centre des Archives diplomatiques, 378 PO/C/255, Ambassade de France à Londres, Fonds Carlton, unsent draft report, May 1940, fo.4. My translation.
15. CHAR, 8/596, Churchill to Hendrikus Colijn, 12 September 1938, fo.11.
16. CHAR 8/596, Chamberlain to Churchill, 8 September 1938, fo.15. Chamberlain's letter was written a week ahead of his first meeting (15 September) with Hitler to discuss the settlement of the Sudetenland.

17. The Hague, Het Nationaal Archief, 2.05.44, Gezantschap Groot-Brittannië, inv.nr.1182, van Limburg to Patijn, 23 February 1939, fo.3.
18. The Hague, Het Nationaal Archief, 2.05.44, van Limburg to van Kleffens, 21 November 1939. *Morning Post* article by J.B. Firth with references to the Low Countries' historic role as a buffer-zone in the early modern period.
19. Madrid, Ministerio de Asunto Exteriores y de Cooperación, Leg.R.833, Exp.18, Spanish Embassy in London, Duke of Alba to Jordana, 5 December 1938, no.52.
20. For the Pitt reference, see *The War Speeches of William Pitt the Younger* 50.
21. British Library, ADD MSS 46116, Gladstone Papers, *The Peace of Utrecht 1713. Its effect on the general relations of England with the continent*, fo.4.
22. CHAR 8/547, Churchill to Colijn, 1 January 1937, fo.24.
23. Utrecht, Geyl Archief, III.31, M.A. Thomson to Geyl, 29 October 1950.
24. CHAR 8/483, Petronella Van Hogendorp to Churchill, 8 January 1934, fo.124. Petronella Van Hogendorp was the descendant of the liberal politician Gijsbert Karel Van Hogendorp (1762-1834), who had masterminded the Constitutions of 1814 and 1815.
25. CHAR 8/595, Feiling to Churchill, 23 February 1938, fo.74. Feiling later became the first official historian of Neville Chamberlain.
26. See Cato, *Guilty Men*.
27. CHAR 8/595, Churchill to Feiling, 26 February 1938, fo.76.
28. CHAR 8/595, Trevelyan to Churchill, 26 February 1938, fo.77. *The Daily Express* was a pro-appeasement paper owned by Lord Beaverbrook.
29. CHAR 8/595, Marsh to Churchill, 26 February 1938, fo.78.
30. See Norman Rose's "The resignation of Anthony Eden".
31. CHAR 8/595, 3 March 1938, Eden to Churchill, fo.82.
32. CHAR 8/21, Godley to Churchill, 12 October 1905, fo.9. "Ἀρχὴ ἄνδρα δείξει" was in fact a reference to a saying by Bias, one of the Seven Sages of Greece: Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1130a.
33. CHAR 8/709, Harrap to Churchill, 11 May 1945, fo.68.
34. CHAR 28/25/6-8, Churchill to Lady Randolph, 16 May 1896.
35. CHAR 2/396, Lytton to Churchill, no date but May 1940, fo.36.
36. CHAR 8/13/1-13, Winston Churchill, *The Scaffolding of Rhetoric*, fo.1.
37. For Churchill's full speeches, see [www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches](http://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches) (last accessed 18 August 2019).
38. CHAR 8/595, Churchill to Trevelyan, 15 February 1938, fo.61.

## ABSTRACTS

The enduring myth of Churchill as the Prime Minister who saved Britain from Nazi invasion in 1940 tends to overshadow his reputation as a man of letters. Churchill was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1953. He was the author of an impressive number of history books, among which *The Life and Times of Marlborough* (1934-38), *The History of the English-speaking Peoples* (1956-58) or *The Second World War* (1948-53). Only recently have historians become interested in this particular aspect of Churchill's life and career. There is a consensus to argue that Churchill wrote history as a politician, but the existing literature has not properly addressed the issue of his uses of eighteenth-century British history. Many aspects of eighteenth-century British



national and international politics resonated with Churchill's understanding of his own time. This essay will demonstrate that, beyond the obvious case of the Marlborough connection, references to the eighteenth century formed an essential aspect of Churchill's historical culture and that he knew how to make good use of them when needed.

Le mythe persistant du Churchill Premier ministre qui sauva la Grande-Bretagne de l'invasion nazie en 1940 fait parfois oublier sa réputation d'homme de lettres. Churchill fut couronné du prix Nobel de littérature en 1953. Il fut l'auteur d'une œuvre considérable, dont *The Life and Times of Marlborough* (1934-38), *The History of the English-speaking Peoples* (1956-58) et *The Second World War* (1948-53). Le Churchill historien et écrivain n'intéresse véritablement les spécialistes que depuis une quinzaine d'année. On s'accorde généralement à dire que Churchill écrivait l'histoire en homme politique, mais la littérature existante ne s'est guère penchée sur sa lecture du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et l'utilisation qu'il en faisait. De nombreux aspects du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle britannique, tant au niveau national qu'international, faisaient écho à la compréhension qu'avait Churchill de son époque. Le présent article montre que, au-delà de l'évidence du lien de famille entre Marlborough et Churchill, les références au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle formaient un aspect essentiel de la culture historique de ce dernier et qu'il savait en faire bon usage lorsqu'il le jugeait utile.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Churchill, Marlborough, écriture de l'histoire, politique britannique, entre-deux-guerres

**Keywords:** Churchill, Marlborough, history writing, British politics, interwar period

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