

The Greatest: From Babe Ruth to Winston Churchill



Winston Churchill, Graham Sutherland, 1954

“The Greatest” is a game we all like to play, even if that’s not the name we call it. But we generally announce it thus: “The greatest _____ is ... ” The way I play the game it is seldom about an event or a thing, but about people. Usually when you play a game you can be either a winner or a loser or a “tie-er” or “tiar” (how do you spell people who play to a tie?), but I (I have to admit) do not submit to that rule, because I always must win. And I do. Let’s try out a few examples.

Some will say Washington, some will say FDR was the greatest American president, but the answer has to be Abe Lincoln. His tenure was brief, no matter how deep, but of no other prez can we say without some metaphorical exaggeration that he saved the nation. Case slammed shut; if you disagree, go to hell.

We can talk about poets, novelists, dramatists, etc.—and I’m willing to play those games perhaps later. But the greatest writer *per se*—with all due respect to Dante or the Job Poet or whatever genius pops to mind—is William Shakespeare, and anyone who feels we are being Will-slavish (shades of George Bernard Shaw!) is welcome to shut the hell up.

If the game is played about composers I will have to narrow it down to Mozart and Beethoven (while confessing that I thrill most to Jan Sibelius). I will end up electing Beethoven, but I will not invite the Mozartian to hell for obvious reasons. And note that I *elect* Beethoven rather than assign him the greatest as if by royal decree. I have the capacity to display modesty.

Probably most who play the game play it about those who play another game: about sports heroes, that is. A rich field. I would bet that, in American football for instance, most competition involves Quarterbacks, on which I’ll pass today, to get my licks in elsewhere. I’ll bet that fans recalling the great Miami Dolphins teams of the 1970s will tell you that the greatest Fullback was the great Larry Csonka. O.K. But let me

remind you or instruct you about the Army (that is, West Point) teams of 1944, 1945, 1946, when I was in short pants. Felix "Doc" Blanchard, who was "Mr. Inside" to Glenn Davis's "Mr. Outside." As great a one-two punch as ever existed. Doc Blanchard is probably forgotten today, while other service-academy greats like Navy QB Roger Staubach are still lionized. But Doc could be forgotten because unlike the "Staubachs" he did not turn pro after the required tenure in uniform: he remained in the military until retirement as a Colonel, doing heroic service as a fighter pilot in Korea and after. God bless his soul, the greatest Fullback in history. If you don't believe me you could look him up. (That Blanchard began his college career before West Point at my alma mater UNC I assure you is irrelevant. I don't claim the greatest Tailback was Charlie "Choo Choo" Justice, but you'll have to tell me who then was.)

Many sports writers today and Sabrmetricians (after SABR, the Society of American Baseball Research) will insist that the greatest baseball player of all time was Willie Mays—which no matter how politically correct is blatantly absurd. As I have written elsewhere, Mays is the statistical twin of Mickey Mantle, and nobody wants to call "the Mick" the greatest ... because he was that no more than Willie was. Without even mentioning the likes of Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams, Stan Musial, or Hank Aaron, I can name a dozen others who are the equals of Mays and Mantle. The four greatest baseball players are—the evidence is there for anyone to examine—in alphabetical order, Ty Cobb, Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, and Honus Wagner. And probably only Cobb would object to my awarding The Greatest title to Ruth. Name me a Hall-of-Famer who would have made it to the Hall as a pitcher had he not switched after half a decade to the everyday outfield. To equivocate here is simply perverse.

But back to politics now, and noting that *New English Review* has its home in both Nashville, Tennessee, and London,

United Kingdom, who was the greatest Prime Minister of all time? There are several who simply cannot not be considered. Robert Walpole was the first PM and longest serving. William Pitt the Younger, who served almost as long and would be on the list even had he not. Benjamin Disraeli, who alternated with William Gladstone—and about whom both *enough said!* David Lloyd George, who led Great Britain through World War I. Winston Churchill, to whom we obviously return. Margaret Thatcher, who had more balls than any other world leader during her tenure.

All things considered, it has to be Winston Churchill ... because—but not only because—it is next to impossible to imagine Great Britain surviving the greatest war in history, without some accommodation to Hitler, without Churchill at the helm. And there are other considerations, since history is in part drama. Here was a politician whose judgment was held in suspicion by most of his political colleagues for most of his career, no matter how respected and even adored by the populace at large. The Conservative Party never quite forgave him for crossing the aisle to the Liberals early in his parliamentary career, although he crossed because he thought the Conservatives were betraying the “Tory Democracy” of Disraeli. And when he returned to the Tories in the ‘20s he was still suspect. It is doubtful he could have become a Tory PM but for the Chamberlain fiasco (to use short hand); and when he did become PM in 1940, he was head not of a Conservative government but of a “National” one of Tories, Socialists, and Liberals.

Of course the drama went the other way as well, although not in a direction that sullies his reputation but rather enhances sympathetic perspectives of him. The war in Europe over in 1945, but with the Pacific still ablaze, Clement Attlee would not agree to keep the National arrangement alive until peace arrived, so in the July '45 election Churchill lost to Attlee. That's not quite correct, of course, since Britain has a

parliamentary instead of presidential system: Labour won most votes and appointed their leading MP Attlee Prime Minister, making Churchill, who of course retained his seat, leader of the opposition. Nonetheless ...

Although not correct, I am now putting things in a non-British and more universal manner, which although not correct is just nevertheless—and I only partially apologize to British readers. With the war not over and victory in sight, Clement Attlee, whom Churchill had made his Number 2 in the national government, did not have the decency (nor did the Labour Party at large) to allow Churchill to be symbolically the victor that he actually was—especially egregious since Churchill's ally Roosevelt had recently died. And equally indecent were the majority of the British voters, who showed their appreciation for what Winston Churchill had done for them and in their name in the most just war in human memory, the war in which the United Kingdom had been in extraordinary danger like no other in its history ... and brutally rejected him in spite of his greatest achievement. Of course half a decade later Churchill was prime minister again for another half a decade before he retired at his own choice. Lord Nelson famously said, "England expects each man will do his duty." Churchill famously did it. Shoving him aside in the 1945 election was a symbolic moment: it was only just that from that point on *Great Britain* was and remains only *Britain*.

During the interregnum of July 1945 to October 1951, Churchill was in a sense lucky to be dissociated from Britain's moral and imperial decline. Moral? Had Churchill been PM he would never have countenanced the post-Holocaust anti-Zionism and attempted betrayal of Israel by Labour. (Here's a bitter irony: when Labour won in '45 it celebrated with William Blake's "Jerusalem"—"Till we have built Jerusalem, / In England's green and pleasant Land"—but would care little about the actual Jerusalem of the Jews,) here's a bitter irony: And he is free of any responsibility for Labour's hacking away at

his beloved British Empire (which would ultimately cause decades of disaster in Africa). And he, whose career actually in effect began in India, would have fought—perhaps hopelessly—against Gandhi and the Gandhi-ites and against the tragedy of India; it's independence of the culture which had civilized it. There: I reveal my prejudices.

But I will go further with the “greatest” theme. Consider some political giants of the 20th century. O.K.—Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Mao strode upon the earth; but I insist in “the greatest game” on moral standards. I will avoid certain very personal heroes of mine and mention only a few who cannot be ignored, whatever your affiliations are. Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Charles De Gaulle, Konrad Adenauer, who else? Their historical stature cannot be denied. Some conference of historians has recently proclaimed that John Kennedy was the equal of FDR, but I am trying to avoid sentimental nonsense. Now: who was *The Greatest Statesman of the 20th Century*? If the reader thinks it was not Winston Churchill, I would be most attentive if he or she were to write me a letter explaining why not!

But I have more to say about Winston Spencer Churchill. More than by the way, I have recently read Andrew Roberts' monumental *Churchill: Walking with Destiny ...* and I am astounded. Some thoughts in the order in which they occur:

Churchill took his “Tory Democracy” seriously, was never the capitalist lackey that many nominal “conservatives” have been and are. One reason he was loyal to the memory of his father, who never appreciated him, was that Lord Randolph was loyal to Disraeli's visions (and was also, by the way, a philo-Semite like Winston himself, son and father anomalies in the English aristocracy of the time). British Labour can take credit for the welfare state as much as they like, but its progenitor was the Beveridge Plan set in motion by Winston Churchill.

Before he became a parliamentarian, Churchill was a

magnificent soldier. Rather than attend "Oxbridge," as might have been expected, he chose the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and served with extraordinary heroic and adventurous distinction in the Boer War—after serving in India ... and before that quite oddly and not-quite-officially in Cuba (where he picked up the cigar habit). Try to imagine an American congressman, senator, or cabinet member who gives up Washington to enter the Army to go to war. Well, after cabinet service, but on the outs with the PM, Churchill chooses in 1916 to return to the army, so long as he is assured of duty in France and Belgium, where he serves as a Major *in the trenches* with his Grenadiers. Given Churchill's disregard of danger when PM, attested to by numbers of observers, his risk-taking bravery with the Grenadiers is no surprise. (A private association: when I think of Churchill facing danger, my mind leaps to General Vinegar Joe Stillwell leading his troops in Burma, exposing himself as even a Colonel should not do.)

It may not be appreciated by the general public how thoroughly a military man Churchill was, not simply because of Sandhurst and service in several wars as cavalry and infantry officer. He served in several cabinets as War Minister, First Lord of the Admiralty, and Air Minister, thus being a commander of all three traditional branches, and you might with little exaggeration think of him as father of the R.A.F. And when he was Air Minister, he was a flying minister, having actually taught himself to be a pilot. (He was not at the controls the two times his plane crashed, however; he was lucky to be alive.)

Semi-digression: It's clear to me that the greatest poet of the 20th Century was William Butler Yeats; the greatest novelist Thomas Mann. Given the fact that Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and August Strindberg barely made it into the 20th, it's hard to judge with confidence who was the greatest playwright, so I'll settle on George Bernard Shaw. Poetry, fiction, drama—the three major literary genres; but although

fiction writers and dramatists generally write in prose, there is a recognized category of author neither poet nor playwright nor novelist or short-story writer: the prose writer (of essays and of books). Very big in the 19th Century: think of Henry David Thoreau, William Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincey, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin. No, I am not about to declare Winston Churchill the greatest non-fiction prose author of the 20th Century. But I do wish to consider him as writer.

Name me any other politician and statesman who published 37 books. Forgetting his one novel, *Savrola*, which you are free to read, and you'll be surprised if you do, for most people, Churchill the writer is Churchill the historian. Which means the First World War and the interwar period (*The World Crisis*, 5 volumes) and especially the 6 volume *The Second World War. A History of the English Speaking Peoples* in 4 volumes should be just as well known.

But long before these volumes Churchill wrote a history of campaigns in India (which of course was vastly larger than now, since The Raj included today's Pakistan, Bangladesh and other areas). One campaign seems of special interest right now. What's now called "No One Left Behind" was practiced by British and Sikh fighting sadistically brutal Pathan tribes who'd chop up captured wounded: today we call the Pathan, *Pashtun*, and the majority of Taliban are Pashtun.

Churchill also wrote a kind of *combination of history and autobiography* of war in the Sudan (*The River War*, in 2 volumes) and the Boer War, especially *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* and *Ian Hamilton's March*.

Strictly autobiographical were *My African Journey* and *My Early Life*. And not to be ignored is a specialized sort of autobiography, *Painting as a Pastime*—which reminds one of a surprising dimension of this prolific man of words.

Of course Churchill was author of, besides individual essays

in biography, two massive formal biographies, which are also social and political histories of the times. His biography of his father, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, was in 2 volumes. His study of his ancestor the 7th Duke of Marlborough, *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, ran to 4 volumes.

Add to all this around 20 volumes of collected speeches and articles ... and I'm not quite through yet. But before getting to the yet it is worth summarizing and repeating: Winston Churchill was not only soldier and statesman. He was painter, novelist, historian, autobiographer, biographer, essayist, orator, and political thinker ... and that does not cover everything.

My impression from hanging around historians for much of my academic career is that the professional historian class does not take Churchill with adequate seriousness as a historian. Of course all those volumes cannot exactly be dismissed, since Churchill *was there*(!). But his very thereness is problematic for some: Winston Spencer Churchill, Winnie, may be too subjective, since so involved, may not have the objective distance of the professor at his desk in his office in the departmental edifice in the quad. Of course, this is a prejudice or judgment which says that the closer you are to something the less you can see it. Which is not to be dismissed out of hand, but neither is it to be regarded as dispositive: it makes most sense when taken literally, as when you hold a physical object too close to your face, but not when one is weighing his or her experience, which can feed the objective just as much as the subjective. Finally, it seems to me, all depends on the *intelligence* of the observer. And I don't think I can count well enough to mark Churchill's IQ.

And I would like to make a proposition which may seem overly ironic. If you want to weigh Churchill's intelligence, set aside for a moment the histories, on which his reputation as writer ultimately depends, and focus on his independent

essays. For when you read a history your attention is fixed on the historical events—*this* happened because of *that* which was caused by yet *something else*. But when you read an essay, your attention may be fixed on the topic of course, but will be focused just as much—and more—on the voice and tone ... which is to say on the characteristics and peculiarities of the mind of the essayist. And if you read the essays, you will be astonished. I know that as I was reading his essay on Parnell—not because of that particular subject; it just happened at that moment—I thought/felt that I had read no 20th-century writer as natively smart as this, unless it was Einstein.

So I add to the books already mentioned my two favorites (aside from *My Early Life*: few have lived as much by age 25 as Churchill!), two essay collections, *Thoughts and Adventures* and *Great Contemporaries*, both published by the way in the 1930s, that period Churchill was “in the Wilderness,” so to speak. It is hopeless to pick out one or two or a few as representative, for all are surprising, none are predictable.

You would not expect, for instance, to find a relative defense—or at least ironically sympathetic portrait—of Kaiser Wilhelm, in *Great Contemporaries*. Or in same book, given how respectfully historians have treated Leon Trotsky, given (again) how odious Josef Stalin was, Churchill’s view of Lev Bronstein is tonic. In *Thoughts and Adventures*, memoirs of Major Churchill’s tenure in the trenches— “With the Grenadiers” and “Plugstreet”—are for any casual reader a Churchill he or she had not known before even if he or she knew WSC had indeed gone to war. No one will not be startled to find an essay titled “Shall We All Commit Suicide?” Which by the way never mentions self-murder in the text, but provides as bleak a view of human history as one can find short of Schopenhauer. Given the fact that there has seldom if ever been a time when there has not been a war somewhere on this earth, and given the enormous scientific and

technological advances, mankind is in danger more and more as history advances (one later lesson of the Holocaust of course). Oh for the days of "the sword, the spear, the bludgeon." Then "War would in important respects return again to the crude but healthy limits of the barbarous ages,"

I doubt that anyone casually thinks of Churchill, the Anglican agnostic, and of Biblical scholarship, in the same thought. But then there's "Moses: The Leader of a People." Given my love of the "*King James*," I am shocked by my own reaction: the Old Testament would be improved, and Moses would be better understood, were Churchill's essay to replace the Bible's Moses narrative. Near the other end of the book (we're talking about *Thoughts and Adventures*), the second essay, is an analysis of cartoons! One surprise after another. Of course it's no surprise to find essays on topics you'd expect the historian to reflect upon: Ludendorff's strategy the last year of the war, the French Tiger Georges Clemenceau, the U-Boat war, the Irish Treaty, and such. And, incidentally, when you read of a meeting between Churchill, Clemenceau, and Marshal Foch during Ludendorff's last campaign, you wonder about those professors who think perhaps WSC was too close to events to see objectively: who the hell do they think they are?

Nor is it surprising—but surely welcome—to find in *Great Contemporaries* portraits and/or analyses of various prime ministers, Hindenburg and Hitler, Kings George V and Edward VIII, Charles Stewart Parnell (the "uncrowned king of Ireland"), Roosevelt (obviously before their famous companionship), etcetera *und so weiter* ... And unexpected—although why should it be?—"Lawrence of Arabia." Churchill and T.E. Lawrence knew and respected one another, so the essay is a memoir as well as a portrait. Nothing I have ever read about Lawrence competes with it, besides an essay by the American critic Irving Howe years ago, which I'd long thought the best thing on T.E.L. until.

I am indebted, and readers should be too, to *Intercollegiate*

Studies Institute Books and the editor Professor James W. Muller for making these two collections available (and so attractive). I most appreciate that Muller has included essays that Churchill did not include in his first edition of *Great Contemporaries*. For Churchill wrote four strictly literary essays for the collection, only one of which made his first edition: an essay on George Bernard Shaw which begins "Mr. Bernard Shaw was one of my earliest antipathies" and evolves into a respectful but nonetheless caustic assessment of the "Jestor"—as amusing a view of Shaw as William Butler Yeats's dream of a sewing machine at work. The three in the second edition: On H.G. Wells ("We need all our men, especially our gifted men. Among them we need H.G. Wells"); on Rudyard Kipling ("There seemed to be no gallery of human activity which he could not enter easily and unchallenged and which, having entered, he could not illuminate with a light unexpected, piercing, enchanting, and all his own"); and on Charlie Chaplin!

The Chaplin essay *has* to be the best thing written on that genius, but if not quite that, is surely the most surprising. For when Churchill wrote it, Chaplin's greatest films had not yet been made. I had never known these two friends—yes, friends—shared the same middle name, Spencer, but how delightful! This piece is not only a moving portrait, and memoir, but an exercise in aesthetics, sophisticated remarks on the art of acting, especially the power of pantomime. I'll say no more, except for this: the best reason, among many good reasons, for the purchase of *Great Contemporaries* is "Charlie Chaplin."

So now I am going to reverse myself and make a claim I said I was not making. Winston Churchill is the greatest non-fiction prose writer of the 20th Century. Not the greatest literary critic, for that is Edmund Wilson. Add to W.B. Yeats and Thomas Mann and G.B. Shaw, the name Winston Churchill—but do not assume he is merely number four in terms of excellence.

Name me someone else who achieved his level as historian, socio-political thinker, essayist, orator, biographer, autobiographer, journalist ... and throw in novelist and painter on the side.

While I haven't even mentioned Churchill's style: prose of extraordinarily poetic clarity; and a vocabulary always graspable even when it seems to reach into what one might call a meta-dictionary. When was the first time or last time you saw the word *victualment*? I'm not even sure how to pronounce it: *vit-el-ment*, *vick-chual-ment*?

And here's another remark-worthy fact. Both Andrew Roberts and Erik Larsen (*The Splendid and the Vile*) remark on Churchill's education. He read all his life, of course, beginning when a student at Harrow and before. But I doubt the general public appreciates how responsible Churchill was for his own education. Sandhurst was not the British equivalent of West Point, was rather a kind of hyper-specialized junior college. Lieutenant Doc Blanchard would have graduated with a better liberal education than *Leftenant* Churchill did. Knowing that his intellectual education at Sandhurst could not compete with requirements at Oxford or Cambridge, when a young subaltern in India, Churchill set forth on a self-education; historical (devouring Gibbon and others); literary and philosophical (not just Aristotle and Plato but Schopenhauer, etc., etc., as well), which was never interrupted. I would be surprised if there was or is a politician as widely read as Churchill. And thinking of Yeats-Mann-Shaw, I would bet that only Mann might outstrip Churchill in this regard—but I'm not at all sure of that.

Now another minor digression. Bear with me. What do we call ourselves? *Citizen*? Too "public" I think. If I'm a good citizen it means I obey the laws, pay (most of) my taxes, and, now, get my shots and wear my mask, and don't actively pray the anti-vaccine zealots get their lethal come-uppance. *Person*? Too anonymous, really the singular

of *people*. And besides it's associated in my mind with *personality*. Recall the jerk in your high-school yearbook who won "Best Personality?" *Individual?* Try this sentence on: "I try to be a good individual." You sound foolish. *Human Being?* About as neutral as we can get, since it means Male or Female of the human race. (I am too conservative to consider other genders: one is either physically male or female, or a physical freak.) Which does not mean I think of myself as a Man-or-Woman. Nor does it mean that Churchill was the best male-only in Britain in 1940; it means he was the best human being in Britain in 1940, who happened to be a male. So *Man* is what we call him. I suspect the reader senses where I am going.

Who is the best human being you know or have known or have known of? This is no invitation to subjectivity. Were it, in the male realm the best man I've known (but not known of) was my father, a man of modest professional achievement, but a *Mensch*, a kind and loving man whom men admired and women admired and adored, and whom I miss still half a century later. But if we're playing the "Greatest" game we must avoid being blinded by the personal.

Winston Churchill was/is the Greatest Prime Minister, Greatest Statesman of the 20th Century, and Man of Letters Supreme of the same period. If I haven't convinced the reader of that I despair. But now I up the ante. My opinion of Churchill is much influenced not only by my reading of Churchill himself, but by my reading of others *on* Churchill: especially John Lukacs's books on Churchill's "duel" with Adolf Hitler, Erik Larsen's *The Splendid and the Vile* on his first year as Prime Minister, and of course Andrew Roberts' *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*. Super-especially the latter.

The Greatest Human Being of the 20th Century was/is a Man named Winston Spencer Churchill. Honestly: Who Else?