

The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History

Boris Johnson

London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2014

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When this book was first published back in 2014 it did not seem to be worth the trouble reviewing. It was a truly appalling volume that no one except the right-wing press could possibly take seriously; and they only praised it to advance the career of its author. As a supposed biographical study of Winston Churchill it was altogether worthless, even worse than Johnson's earlier 'histories' of the Roman Empire and London and they were pretty dire. And dire books are obviously a reflection of their author. Johnson is a serial liar and casual racist, a homophobe, a sexist and a xenophobe. He is akin to a cross between Benny Hill and Benito Mussolini: completely without principles, wholly irresponsible and unfit for any public office. However, as we know, the incredible has happened and a desperate Conservative Party has actually installed him as Prime Minister! Thus, the book is now worth some critical attention - not for anything it has to say about Churchill but, as I have already indicated, for what it tells us about the author.

He is revealed as a delusional fantasist who sees himself as a Great Man walking with Destiny and shaping History. The point has been made by some that, while Donald Trump is genuinely stupid and unbelievably ignorant, Johnson is only pretending. This book suggests that he has been maintaining the pose of the posh buffoon for so long that he has actually internalised a lot of it and now is one.

There has been a national obsession with Churchill, particularly on the right in this country, for a good many years now. Embodying the time when Britain supposedly stood alone against the Nazis in May 1940, he has become a potent British myth that has proven very useful in the Brexit battles. No one has been more written about. According to Johnson himself there is still something like 'a hundred books a year on our hero'. Yet on the previous page, Johnson seriously suggests that one of his motives for writing his book is that Churchill 'is in danger of being forgotten, or at least imperfectly remembered'.

We cannot, he goes on, 'take his reputation for granted' and there is a danger of people 'forgetting the scale of what he did'. (pp. 3-4)

This is all nonsense. There is no chance whatsoever of Churchill being forgotten. Johnson did not write this book in order to safeguard Churchill's memory or reputation. He wrote it as a work of propaganda to advance his own political career by wrapping himself in the Churchill mythology, putting himself forward as the man's contemporary incarnation. He wants to be seen as ready to step into the breach and save the country from its enemies, just as Churchill did back in 1940. He is putting himself forward as a Churchill mini-me. The whole point of the book was to show just how much of the supposed 'Churchill Factor' its author shared with his hero. (Although, sometimes, it has to be said it seems more about how much of the 'Johnson Factor' Churchill was fortunate enough to possess).

Johnson is perhaps best known for his lack of any political principles and his readiness to take up just about any position in order to advance his personal self-interest. This is not altogether fair. He has an absolutely fixed and determined commitment to inequality, privilege and hierarchy. In many ways he personally embodies this commitment, being the twentieth Old Etonian to hold the office of Prime Minister since the time of Walpole.¹ As far as Johnson is concerned, the rich and super rich are the custodians of a civilised society and the first object of government is their protection and the advancement of their interests. From this derives his belief in the Great Man view of History: that it is great men (and the occasional great woman) who have shaped and made history. The mass of the population, in Johnson's world view, are either onlookers, cheering their betters on; an obstruction – pursuing their own narrow interests through trade unions and such like; or collateral damage in the wars where Great Men really demonstrate their worth.

Churchill, he argues, is the greatest Briton, the man who 'saved our civilisation. And the important point is that only he could have done it'. Churchill, he insists, 'is the resounding human rebuttal to all Marxist historians who think history is the story of vast impersonal economic forces'. (p. 5) Leaving aside his profound ignorance of Marxism, it is worth considering his earlier history of London, *The Spirit of London*, as the quickest way of demonstrating the fallacy of the Great Man view. In this he reduces the history of London down to the biographies of nineteen individuals, including, inevitably, Churchill, who was not even a Londoner, who presumably embody 'the spirit of London'. The whole book is a caricature history, that one can be absolutely confident would never have been published except for the celebrity status of its author. The first edition of the book ended with Keith Richard as

¹ There have been only nine Prime ministers who were not privately educated!

the culmination of Londonness, presumably in order to demonstrate how cool the author is, while the later 2012 edition ended with Mo Farah. The inclusion of Mo Farah obviously demonstrates that Johnson is no racist. He even manages to avoid mentioning any supposed 'watermelon smile'. Such casually racist remarks are only really deployed when he feels the need to show his right-wing audience that he privately shares their racist, homophobic and xenophobic prejudices. Johnson has his cake and eats it.

For Johnson the key moment of Churchill's apotheosis was when he became Prime Minister in May 1940. Before then, he was already a Great Man, but, at that point, he becomes the Greatest. Churchill transmogrified (Johnson's word) 'himself into the spirit of the nation, the very emblem of defiance'. He goes on to insist that to 'lead the country in time of war, to keep people together at a moment of profound anxiety, you need to "connect" with them . . . in a deep and emotional way'. To inspire the British people, Churchill 'needed at some level to identify with them – with those aspects of their character that he, and they, conceived to be elemental to the national psyche'. And he goes on to identify four key attributes of John Bull that Churchill and the British people shared. First there is our great sense of humour, 'unlike some countries [I] could mention'; second our ability to drink other nationalities 'under the table'; third our suspicion 'of people who are inordinately thin'; and fourth the way in which we think of Britain 'as the natural homeland of the eccentric, the oddball and the individualist'. (p. 136) Really! It is difficult to know what to make of this moronic garbage. The whole discussion is positively embarrassing. One is shocked that the author of this nonsense is a Member of Parliament, let alone the Prime Minister, and can only hope that the book never falls into the hands of someone studying for their History GCSE.

More importantly, the idea that only Churchill could have inspired the British to fight on alone in 1940 is a myth. First of all, Britain was not alone: it was at the centre of the largest Empire the world had ever seen, something Johnson celebrates elsewhere in the book; and second because Churchill had nothing whatsoever in common with the overwhelming majority of the British people. He never in his whole life travelled by bus and only once used the London Underground. This was a man who, in Johnson's words, 'was never so happy as when a servant was pulling on his socks'. (p. 106) He was transmogrified by a powerful state propaganda machine. This machine was the crucial factor. Similar propaganda efforts in 1941 played an important part in making Stalin the Russian emblem of defiance and Hitler the German emblem of defiance in 1945. In the British instance, the propaganda effort was

decisive, not the supposed character of the man or his supposed ability to speak 'to the depths of people's souls'. (p. 273)

Johnson sings Churchill's praises throughout the whole of his life. We are seriously told that his military exploits on the North-West Frontier in India would, today, have earned him the Victoria Cross and that his heroism at the battle of Omdurman in 1898 was exemplary, bravely shooting down 'natives' fighting in defence of their homes and homeland. It is worth remembering that at Omdurman, British casualties were 48 killed while at least 16,000 Sudanese died, many of them butchered while trying to surrender or when lying wounded and helpless. It was more of a massacre than a battle. To be fair, Churchill did protest against the shooting and bayoneting of the Sudanese wounded. He went on to show similar bravery in South Africa during the Boer War. And all this was just so much preparation for the First and Second World Wars. Nevertheless, Johnson argues that Churchill was not a war-monger. Quite how he squares this with his account of how Churchill 'loved' – yes, loved – war is difficult to see. On one occasion, Churchill actually told Margot Asquith that war was 'delicious' – and this was during the horror that was the First World War. He was 'excited by war' and 'without war he knew there could be no glory – no real chance to emulate Napoleon, Nelson or his ancestor Marlborough'. 'War sent the adrenalin spurting from his glands'. (pp. 168-169)² But while he 'loved' war, he did not support wars of aggression. Once again, this is so much nonsense. In 1914 Britain was a satisfied Empire intent on holding on to what it had already conquered but, as soon as the war began, the country's war aims encompassed the dividing up of enemy colonies with its allies. As Johnson himself admits, the British Empire was in control of 9 per cent more of the world after the War than it had been before. This was not just by chance. This was what the war was really all about, what millions had died for – that and the glorification of men like Churchill.

What of Churchill's attitude towards ordinary people? Johnson celebrates his record of support for social reform when he was a member of the Pre-WW1 Liberal government – reforms that were bitterly opposed by the Conservative opposition, of course. When Churchill supported reform then, as far as Johnson is concerned, reform was obviously justified. He even tries to give Churchill credit for the reforms of the Attlee government! He does think Churchill went too far when he lowered the pension age from seventy years to sixty-five though, and as he writes, 'we have just had to reverse this excessive generosity'. (p. 156) And we can look forward to a Johnson government eventually raising it to seventy-five years if he gets the chance, effectively

² His repeated use of the word 'spurt' in his writings is, of course, of considerable psychological interest.

abolishing the old age pension for millions of people. Johnson desperately searches for evidence of Churchill's generosity towards – and concern for – ordinary people and obviously thinks he has found it with regard to his nanny. Churchill paid for her funeral and tombstone. Only a privileged public schoolboy could see concern for his nanny – his surrogate mother after all – as indicating concern for ordinary people but, for Johnson, it shows his 'fundamental goodness' and proves that he was not a 'selfish tosser'. (pp. 108, 114)

In one Chapter, 'Playing Roulette With History', Johnson considers Churchill's errors and mistakes and proceeds to mark them out of ten both for their 'FIASCO FACTOR' and their 'CHURCHILL FACTOR'. This is easily the most stupid part of the book even though, as we have seen, there is plenty of competition. He looks at Antwerp in 1914, the Gallipoli landings, the post-WW1 intervention in Russia, the Chanak Crisis, the return to the Gold Standard, the Abdication Crisis and Churchill's attitude towards India in the 1930s. The crass stupidity of this manner of proceeding is best demonstrated regarding Gallipoli. This military operation, in which 56,000 allied troops were killed and 123,000 were wounded, is given a mark of 10 for the 'FIASCO FACTOR' and 10 for the 'CHURCHILL FACTOR', although what that actually means is anyone's guess. While Johnson is attempting to be witty, what he actually displays is an astonishing degree of callous disregard for the immense suffering and enormous loss of life that the battle cost. In many ways, this sums up his own particular version of the Great Man view of History.

Let us look in a bit more detail at his discussion of India in the 'Playing Roulette with History' chapter. He sees India as Churchill's own EU problem. According to Johnson, Churchill was not really that bothered about India and was, in fact, mainly concerned with 'positioning' himself so as to be able to succeed Stanley Baldwin as Conservative Party leader. This was the real motive for his opposition to any concessions to the Congress movement. While it is certainly true that Johnson's support for Brexit is all about 'positioning', the same is not true of Churchill's determined opposition to any weakening of the British position in India. As far as Churchill was concerned, holding on to India was essential if Britain was to remain a great Imperial power. What is even more interesting is that Johnson's discussion of India does not so much as mention the Bengal Famine of 1943-1944 with its death toll of up to three million men, women and children. This is like writing a biography of Stalin that does not mention the great Ukrainian Famine of the early 1930s. Now Johnson certainly knows about the Bengal Famine because he gives it two whole sentences in his discussion of Churchill in his *The Spirit of London* – and they are savagely critical sentences it has to be said. His failure to confront the

Famine and Churchill's role in sabotaging relief in *The Churchill Factor* surely reflects an awareness that Churchill's conduct seriously compromises his supposed status as a 'Great Man' even in Johnson's terms. Moreover, this completely undermines the argument that the British Empire was a benign Empire, operating for the benefit of the 'native' peoples. To be fair, Johnson is not alone among Churchill biographers in his refusal to confront the enormity of this catastrophe and the extent of the Churchill government's responsibility for the death toll. One is left wondering how Johnson would have scored this particular episode!

What will strike any reader of this book who is not altogether captivated by Johnson is the transparency of his effort to associate himself with the Churchill myth, to plant in his reader's mind the notion that he has the Churchill Factor. Let us look at his discussion of Conservative MPs attitudes towards Churchill in May 1940. They regarded him as 'an opportunist, a turncoat, a blowhard, an egotist, a rotter, a bounder, a cad', someone with a bit of a drink problem. (p. 32) Johnson is obviously writing about himself here, about how he is regarded by most of his MP colleagues (except for the drink problem). This is, indeed, how he was and still is regarded. The important difference between him and Churchill was that by 1940 Churchill already had extensive experience in government: the Home Office, the War Office, the Colonial office, and the Exchequer. All Johnson has is a brief moment as the worst Foreign Secretary of recent years.

Which brings us to the one particular area of Churchill's life that does cause Johnson serious concern: his sex life. The fact that 'he had fewer notches on his bedpost than you might expect for a man whose appetites . . . were generally so titanic' obviously causes Johnson considerable worry. Can he really be a Great Man? Johnson completely rejects the notion that he was 'some sort of asexual Edward Heath-like character' and does his best to identify some extra-marital affairs, but without any real success. It takes an effort to get one's head around the fact that the man who wrote this is today leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister. It does, of course, tell us very little about Churchill but so much about Johnson. As he once put it, he is positively 'busting with spunk'.³ One thing that we can be certain of is that, whatever one thinks of Churchill, there is no way he would ever have let someone like Boris Johnson anywhere near the levers of power.

³ 'Busting with spunk' is the title of chapter 10 of Sonia Purnell's biography, *Just Boris: The Irresistible Rise of a Political Celebrity* (London: Aurum Press 2011).

