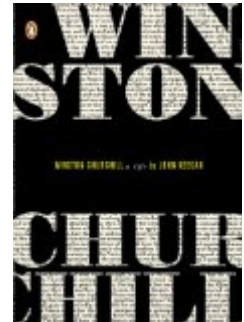




John Keegan. *Winston Churchill: A Life.* New York: Penguin Books, 2002. 196 pp.
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Reviewed by Neal McCrillis

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Winston Churchill, authored by the respected military historian John Keegan, is one of several recent biographies of the most famous British leader. WorldCat lists more than eight thousand publications which contain "Churchill" in the title. In addition, there are more than six hundred biographical works related to Churchill. There are also three bibliographies of work about Churchill, all of which have appeared during the last decade.[1] Astonishingly, two of these bibliographies were published by the same company in 2000.

The ever increasing number of works related to Churchill is intriguing. The general public's thirst for books about Britain's most famous leader seems unquenchable. In fact during the current decade, there has been a notable increase in the number of books concerning Churchill. Since 2000 129 books related to the wartime prime minister have been published. This compares with fewer than 100 during each of the previous four decades.

Given the range and breadth of biographies and other books related to Britain's famous prime

minister, what does Keegan's work offer? This book is part of the Penguin Lives series which is aimed at general readers, offering them short accessible accounts in paperback. *Winston Churchill* certainly fits this description. It weighs in at a mere 192 pages. It does not contain notes or an index although it does have a short bibliography. What is most striking is that the recent biographies by John Charmley (1992), Norman Rose (1994), Roy Jenkins (2001), and Geoffrey Best (2001) are not mentioned. In fact the most recent publication listed in the bibliography dates from 1991. Keegan also does not appear to use the companion document volumes of the Randolph Churchill and Martin Gilbert official biography.

It may not be significant enough to be termed a trend, but Keegan is not the only senior historian who is turning to reflect on the World War II era as the formative period which shaped his life and the contemporary world.[2] John Keegan (b. 1934) notes in his biography that he was originally uninterested in Churchill, who seemed old-fashioned compared to the young Royal Air Force pilots and other heroes of the time. After 1945

Keegan continued to perceive the elder statesman as "heavily Conservative in the old-fashioned sense: traditionally imperialist abroad, selfishly capitalist at home" (pp. 2-3). His opinion later changed after hearing a recording of Churchill's wartime speeches while staying in a friend's house in New York City during his first visit to America.

From Keegan's perspective Churchill's wartime leadership was epic in scale and the veteran politician led his country almost single-handedly to victory. "In 1940," writes Keegan, "events offered him the opportunity to make the present itself into an epic. He seized it with both hands and, through his extraordinary oratory, determined the victorious outcome of the greatest threat his country had ever faced and of the subsidiary and consequent threat to the idea of freedom ... in the Cold War that followed" (p. 191).

Keegan brings to his work a deep understanding of British military history and of the military conflicts in which Churchill was involved from the Boer War to World War II. A case in point is Keegan's explanation of the British tradition of military regiments. He also presents the great man through Churchill's own words and the skillful use of personal details. Discussing the prime minister's work habits, Keegan notes that Churchill cared little about his appearance, preferring zippered shoes for their convenience. The prime minister also insisted that his black dispatch box be carefully organized according to his priorities from the most pressing "Top of the Box" items to the "R Week-end" materials that could benefit from a weekend of reflection. In addition Keegan explores some of the prime minister's failures. During World War II Churchill grossly overestimated the effectiveness of the Special Operations Executive, grew disillusioned with the strategic bombing campaign, and remained stubbornly focused on the Italian front even as his generals were preparing for Normandy, the largest amphibious landing in history.

Unfortunately Keegan's work is inadequate for undergraduate classrooms. For example, Keegan rightly notes Churchill's early support for social reform but claims that Churchill (not David Lloyd George) was largely responsible for the achievements of the Edwardian Liberal Party (p. 72). He also incorrectly refers to Lloyd George as Churchill's successor at the Board of Trade (p. 67). During October 1914 Churchill became involved in a hastily organized expedition to Antwerp. It is difficult to see how Keegan could possibly describe the Antwerp adventure as a "success" given the thousands of casualties (p. 84). Even if one accepts Keegan's claim, his failure to mention that Churchill made an ill-judged offer to resign his Admiralty post in order to assume a military command, leaves the reader with a false impression of the episode and the man. There are similar problems with Keegan's analysis of Churchill's role during the failed Dardanelles campaign.

Probably most troubling is Keegan's analysis of Churchill's activities during "The Wilderness Years." Although Churchill warned of the dangers posed by Adolf Hitler, to present him as almost exclusively focused upon this is to accept Churchill's own postwar account of his life. Like a number of others, Churchill was attracted to Hitler's dynamism and his anti-Communism. He stated as much in a 1935 essay on Hitler published in *Great Contemporaries* (1937). More significantly, Churchill was deeply involved in exactly the kind of issues that Keegan dismisses as "distractions from the growing military crisis" (p. 112). The most important of these was India; this was an issue with which Churchill was completely engaged during the first half of the 1930s. Keegan devotes two sentences to it. To suggest that from 1932 Churchill was single-mindedly and almost single-handedly re-focusing British attention on the threat of Hitler is misleading and creates a false portrayal of the man. It also ignores the powerful domestic forces that led many politicians to support appeasement.

A final example of the flaws in this account is Churchill's involvement in the early and disastrous World War II Norwegian campaign. Keegan correctly notes that this episode, not the French campaign, brought down Neville Chamberlain's government in May 1940. Yet most historians consider Churchill to have been the designer and prime advocate for the Scandinavian offensive. Its failure was as much or more Churchill's responsibility than Chamberlain's, although the latter's fall reflected the dissatisfaction that had accumulated for more than a year.

Keegan's *Winston Churchill* is highly portable and is easy to read. It is well suited for a popular audience and for the casual reader. Yet, despite its strengths, it is not a biography that can be recommended for undergraduates. It ignores recent scholarship, is superficial in places and occasionally even wrong. For classroom use, the best short biographies remain those by Rose, Jenkins, Best, and Paul Addison (2004).

Notes

[1]. Buckley Barry Barrett, *Churchill: A Concise Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000); Eugene L. Rasor, *Winston S. Churchill: 1974-1965: A Comprehensive Historiography and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000); and Curt L. Zoller, *Annotated Bibliography about Sir Winston S. Churchill* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004).

[2]. Geoffrey Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ix.

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