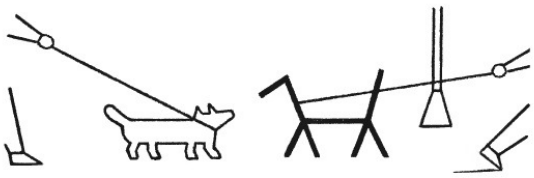
Churchill inspecting American troops in England in March, 1944. "We shall go on to the end," he had said defiantly, four years earlier, when

all seemed lost. "We shall never surrender."

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

FINEST HOURS

The making of Winston Churchill.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Seventy years ago this summer, in June of 1940, an aging British politician, who for the previous twenty years had seemed to his countrymen to be one of those entertaining, eccentric, essentially literary figures littering the margins of political life, got up to make a speech in the House of Commons. The British Expeditionary Forces had just been evacuated from France, fleeing a conquering German Army—evacuated successfully, but, as the speaker said, wars aren't won that way—and Britain itself seemed sure to be invaded, and soon. Many of the most powerful people in his own party believed it was time to settle for the best deal you could get from the Germans.

At that moment when all seemed lost, something was found, as Winston Churchill pronounced some of the most famous lines of the past century. "We shall go on to the end," he said defiantly, in tones plummy and, on the surviving recordings, surprisingly thick-tongued. "We shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." Churchill's words did all that words can do in the world. They said what had to be done; they announced why it had to be done then; they inspired those who had to do it.

That fatal summer and those fateful words continue to resonate. Revisionism, the itch of historians to say something new about something already known, has nicked Churchill without really drawing blood. In American conservative circles, he is still El Cid with a cigar, hoisted up on his horse to confront the latest existential threat to Western civilization (though his admirers tend to censor out the champagne or cognac glass that this ferocious Francophile kept clamped there, too). In Britain, it's a little different. Just as J.F.K. is adored abroad and admired at home—where by now he's seen as half liberal martyr, half libertine satyr—Churchill in Britain is revered but quarantined, his reputation held to the five years of his wartime rule. The Labour grandees Roy Jenkins and Denis Healey treat Churchill in their memoirs as a historical figure deserving of affection and respect but not really part of the story of modern Britain. (Jenkins eventually wrote a life of him, and ended up surprised by his own high opinion.) The revisionism from Churchill's own side is more marked; some on the British right even see him as the man who helped lose the Empire in a self-intoxicated excess of oratory that was the sort of thing only Americans would take seriously. It is typical of what his American fans can miss that a writer for the *Wall Street Journal* recently quoted Gore Vidal calling Evelyn Waugh a kind of prose Churchill, and thought this flattering to Waugh. In fact, Waugh disliked Churchill, prose and politics alike—his alter ego, Guy Crouchback, calls him "a professional politician, a master of sham-Augustan prose, a Zionist, an advocate of

ABOVE: PHILIPPE WEISBECKER; OPPOSITE: AP

the popular front in Europe, an associate of the press-lords and of Lloyd George"—and his dry-eyed, limpid, every-pebble-in-its-place language was utterly remote from Churchill's sonorous, neo-Latinate sentences, and meant to be so.

But book after book about Churchill still comes: in the past few years a life by the omnivorous biographer Paul Johnson, "Churchill" (Viking; $24.95); a complete collection of Churchill's quotations, "Churchill by Himself" (Public Affairs; $29.95); and new and more specialized studies of Churchill at war, Churchill at Yalta, and Churchill in the memory of his countrymen. All these supplement the standard biographies, which include Martin Gilbert's official multivolume history, published in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, Jenkins's single-volume life, from 2001, and John Keegan's crisp and authoritative life, from the year after. Meanwhile, the American historian John Lukacs's decades' worth of books about Churchill—slicing fine tranches of the crucial months and weeks and even days—remain the most insightful studies of Churchill's psychology and political practice. Reading all these, one finds a Churchill who is a good deal more compelling than the eternal iron man. Goethe wrote that Hamlet was a man who was asked to do something that seemed impossible for that man to do. Churchill is a kind of Hamlet in reverse, a man who was called on, late in life, to do the one thing he was uniquely able to do, and did it.

Churchill's life is so complex that he would have justified a biography or two had he died in 1931, when he was hit by a car on a New York street. The American connection was anything but incidental. He had an American mother, a loyal American audience, and, twice in his life, a determination to bring America into a war. (The editor Maxwell Perkins once said that he seemed to be "much more like an American than an Englishman.") During a period when Britain was to the world what America is now, the No. 1 nation with a widely admired élan, Churchill always kept a friendly, steady eye on the oncoming American chariot.

At the same time, Churchill was never entirely trusted by the upper crust to which he belonged, and certainly never by its organized voice, the Conservative Party. To be born both at the top of the tree and out on a limb is an odd combination, and that double heritage accounts for a lot of what happened to him later. Some of this oddity he owed to his mother, the New York heiress Jennie Jerome. But he owed more to his father, Randolph, who had been a meteor across the sky in British politics in the eighteen-seventies and eighties.

Randolph came from an old family—Churchill could never get enough of his descent from the first Duke of Marlborough, who defeated French and Bavarian troops at the Battle of Blenheim—but he belonged to a new generation of British politicians. After the golden age of the gentleman-gladiator, the eighteen-sixties and seventies of Disraeli and Gladstone, came a time of professional politics played as a blood sport. Randolph Churchill and his close collaborator (and, later, competitor) Joseph Chamberlain, who made his fortune as an industrialist in Birmingham, represented a new brutality: both were ambitious, driven, and ruthless, with an imperial turn of mind that Winston absorbed as second nature. Randolph, as Secretary of State for India in a Tory government, presented Burma as a "New Year's present" to the Queen. The imperialism of the older Churchill and Chamberlain appealed to tribal honor in military conquest, cutting right across class lines and limitations.

It may seem mysterious that jingoism should appeal so overwhelmingly to the working classes, easily trumping apparently obvious differences in interests between them and the economic imperialists. Why should conquering Burma be of significance to a Cockney? But imperialism is the cosmopolitanism of the people, the lever by which the unempowered come to believe that their acts have world-historical meaning. This understanding was the spine and bone of the younger Winston's politics. In his mind, British modernization and progress—and throughout the first part of his career he was seen, above all, as a progressive—were always tied up with the cult and religion of Empire. For Churchill, imperialism and progressivism were parts of the same package. You kept the Empire together by making sure that its very different peoples felt cared for by a benevolent overseer at home. (This faith in government as the essential caretaker led him later to support the creation of a national health service, "in order to ensure that everybody in the country, irrespective of means, age, sex, or occupation, shall have equal opportunities to benefit from the best and most up-to-date medical and allied services available.")

Lord Randolph resigned in 1886, at his moment of maximum influence, apparently thinking that he could get a chunk of Parliament to follow him. He was wrong, and it is a sign of the changing mood that, where Gladstone resigned and returned as regularly as a soprano, Churchill's resignation was a death sentence to his hopes. In the spring of 1894, he became mentally unstable. The old story that his sudden decline was due to progressive syphilis now seems untrue—he is thought to have had a brain tumor—but the son must surely have suspected that his father died from venereal disease.

Winston recalled only a few intimate conversations with his father, and one of these, though couched as an apology, stayed with him: "Do remember things do not always go right with me. My every action is misjudged and every word distorted. . . . So make some allowances." Winston's own life had, up until the summer of 1940, the same shape of overreach and frustrated hopes. Something subtler came to him as a legacy, though. Having his father's work to finish, he also belonged emotionally with him in the nineteenth century, in a world of giants of the grand gesture, like Disraeli and Gladstone, who had the self-confidence to let the slightly loony inner man shine through the public mask.

After attending Sandhurst, in the eighteen-nineties, Churchill set out to make a reputation as an imperial warrior. He went adventuring, in South Africa and elsewhere, in a very "Ripping Yarns" spirit, and wrote very "Ripping Yarns" journalism about it. "The British army had never fired on white troops since the Crimea, and now that the world was growing so sensible and pacific—and so democratic too—the great days were over," he wrote of this period in his life. "Luckily, however, there were still savages and barbarous peoples. There were Zulus and Afghans, also the Dervishes of the Soudan. Some of these might, if they were well-disposed, 'put up a show.' "

He entered politics in 1902, on the strength of his imperial adventures and his family name. If no man is a hero to his

valet, every man can be best judged by his personal assistant, and Winston's longest-serving private secretary, from the time he was elected to Parliament, was the remarkable and ever-admiring man of letters Edward Marsh. It was Marsh who recorded Churchill, on a visit to a poor neighborhood in Manchester, saying, with his odd and signature mixture of real empathy and inherited condescension, "Fancy living in one of these streets—never seeing anything beautiful—never eating anything savoury—*never saying anything clever!*"

Churchill earned his way forward by means of his vibrant skills as a debater and a phrasemaker. ("If you want to make a true picture in your mind of a battle between great modern ironclad ships," he said in Parliament, "you must not think of it as if it were two men in armour striking at each other with heavy swords. It is more like a battle between two eggshells striking each other with hammers.") As First Lord of the Admiralty at the start of the Great War, he believed that the slugging match on the Western Front showed a lack of imagination, and his pet project became the doomed invasion of the hinterland of the Turkish Empire, summed up in the name Gallipoli. The idea was to make an amphibious assault on the Gallipoli peninsula, on the European side of Turkey, and, though one official rationale was to open a route to Russia, then an ally, Churchill plainly saw it as a coup de théâtre that would take Constantinople, break the logjam of the war, and astonish the world—a brave imperial coup, another Burma at a still bigger moment.

On the night, the ill-prepared British and Allied troops met grimly resistant Turkish troops, got bogged down and bloodied, and had to be withdrawn. It is an article of faith in Australia and New Zealand that their troops were used by Churchill as cannon fodder, just as it is in Canada that the Canadians were taken by the Brits to serve a similar role at Dieppe, nearly three decades later. This seems on the whole unfair—the incompetent mass destruction of helpless infantrymen was a *déformation professionelle* of the entire British leadership, playing no favorites. Yet it burned into Churchill's reputation the idea that he was indifferent to the welfare of the ordinary soldier, and that his theatrical instincts were a mortal danger to privates and political parties alike.

Those who considered him an eccentric rider of hobbyhorses were confirmed in their view when, in the early nineteen-thirties, he routinely denounced Gandhi and Indian nationalism, breaking with the Conservative Party over it. "A seditious Middle Temple lawyer now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East" was among the milder things he said. One of the reasons that well-intentioned people didn't take seriously what he soon was saying about Hitler was that he had recently been saying the same kind of thing about Gandhi.

Only when Hitler came to power, in 1933, did Churchill's great moment begin. Magnanimity in victory was a core principle for Churchill, and he had been generous about Hitler in the beginning, recognizing that a defeated people need a defiant leader. But he soon caught on: "In the German view, which Herr Hitler shares, a peaceful Germany and Austria were fallen upon in 1914 by a gang of wicked designing nations, headed by Belgium and Serbia, and would have defended herself successfully if only she had not been stabbed in the back by the Jews. Against such opinions it is vain to argue."

People sometimes say that Churchill was quick to spot what Hitler was about because he was a student of history. But everyone in England had a historical line on Hitler: he was a second Mussolini, three parts bluster to one part opportunism; he was, at worst, another Napoleon, with continental ambitions but hardly a monster. Churchill saw that he was a fierce nationalist who had found a way of resurrecting and winning the obedience of the great engine of recent European history, the German Army. "You must never underrate the power of the German machine," he said, "this tremendous association of people who think about nothing but war." And then Churchill understood in his bones that Hitler was an apocalyptic romantic, who genuinely *wanted* a war. Churchill had always been perfectly willing to negotiate with bad guys, even with people he thought of as terrorists: one of the high points of his political career was the agreement for Irish independence that, as Colonial Secretary in the Lloyd George government after the war, he arrived at with the I.R.A. leader Michael Collins, a man who, in Churchill's mind, was simply a murderer. Churchill not only negotiated with Collins but came to admire his character and dash. Churchill's point, in the thirties, was not that bad guys should never be placated but that Germans possessed by a big idea and a reformed military are extremely dangerous to their neighbors.

For Churchill always thought in terms not of national interest but of a national character that could trump interest. The Germans "combine in the most deadly manner the qualities of the warrior and the slave," he said firmly. "They

do not value freedom themselves and the spectacle of it in others is hateful to them." Or, as he put it more succinctly, "They are carnivorous sheep." We do not think this way anymore. (Except during the World Cup, when we do.) As an intellectual exercise, defining Germans seems perilously close to defaming Jews. Churchill did not see it this way. Germans for him are disciplined, servile, and dangerous when their servility meets a character out of Wagner; Russians are sloppy, sentimental, and brutally effective in the long haul; the French are brilliant, gallant, but prone to quick collapses through an excess of imagination and blind, vindictive self-assertion—these are the clichés of European history, but they are Churchill's touchstones. The Germans were trouble because they needed a nanny and they had got a nihilist. "This war would never have come," he said, after it was under way, "unless, under American and modernising pressure, we had driven the Hapsburgs out of Austria and Hungary and the Hohenzollerns out of Germany. By making these vacuums we gave the opening for the Hitlerite monster to crawl out of its sewer on to the vacant thrones."

This habit of thinking about peoples and their fate in collective historical cycles, however archaic it might seem, gave him special insight into Hitler, who, in a Black Mass distortion, pictured the world in the same way. Both Churchill and Hitler were nineteenth-century Romantics, who believed in race and nation—in the *Volksgeist*, the folk spirit—as the guiding principle of history, filtered through the destinies of great men. (It is startling to think that, even in the darkest depths of the Second World War, J. R. R. Tolkien was writing the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, which contains, with the weird applicability available only to poetry and myth, the essential notion that the good gray wizard can understand the evil magi precisely because he is just enough like them to grasp their minds and motives in ways that they cannot grasp his.) Of course, Churchill and Hitler were, in the most vital respects, opposites. Churchill was, as Lukacs insists, a patriot, imbued with a love of place and people, while Hitler was a nationalist, infuriated by a hatred of aliens and imaginary enemies. But Churchill knew where Hitler was insecure and where he was strong, and knew how to goad him, too.

When war began at last, Churchill was ready. In September, 1939, he joined the Cabinet as First Lord of the Admiralty, but there was nothing automatic about his rise to the premiership. In May of 1940, Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, was open to negotiations with Hitler, by way of Mussolini, to see what terms were available, and he had the confidence of the Conservative Party, and of the British establishment, in a way that Churchill never would. "If we got to the point of discussing the terms of a general settlement, and found we could obtain terms which did not postulate the destruction of our independence, we should be foolish if we did not accept them," Halifax said bluntly. Churchill grasped the sort of terms that would likely be on offer from the Germans: the same sort of terms offered to and accepted by Vichy France in June. He could even name those whom Hitler would surely have picked to be the Pétains and Lavals of England: the Fascist Oswald Mosley as Prime Minister; King Edward called home from abroad; and Lloyd George brought out of retirement. The list of internees already existed.

The usual explanation for Churchill's advancement is that Halifax, as a peer, would have had to lead the government from the House of Lords, an implausible situation. But Lukacs argues persuasively for the importance of Churchill's genuine magnanimity to the defeated and ailing Neville Chamberlain—an ancient rivalry of fathers brought forward into a new generation and healed—which kept Chamberlain from opposing his old rival Churchill. And the Labour ministers who had been brought into the coalition in the War Cabinet were thoroughgoing anti-Hitlerians; Churchill ascended with the crucial support of the socialists.

So, with nothing else to be done, Churchill began to speak. He gave six major speeches, in Parliament or on the radio, in the next four and a half months, and much of his reputation rests on those. His admirers, including Isaiah Berlin, who wrote a study of Churchill's diction soon after the war, point to his several stylistic sources: the suave ironies of Gibbon in "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," the portentous periods of Macaulay, Dr. Johnson's Latinate constructions. Gibbon, in particular, is present everywhere—in the urge to balance every clause at the beginning of a sentence with a companion clause at the end, and in the paragraph play of slow build and snappy payoff—and not the least of modern ironies is that Gibbon's style, invented for a book whose implicit point was that the entire thousand-plus-year adventure of "Christian civilization" had been a comedown from the pagan past, got invoked to save it.

Reading the speeches today, you see the power of the elevated, "artificial" rhetoric that offended the ear of avant-garde taste in the nineteen-twenties, when Churchill was mocked for old-fashioned pomposity; the critic Herbert Read criticized his stale images, violent metaphors, and melodramatic atmosphere. Churchill could sometimes achieve a monosyllabic simplicity that brings tears to the eyes with its force and defiance:

> I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind.
>
> We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering.
>
> You ask, what is our policy? I will say it is to wage war by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us, to wage war against a monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy.
>
> You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word:
>
> Victory.
>
> Victory at all costs—Victory in spite of all terror—victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival.

Even at such moments, though, the language is remarkably abstract and impersonal. There is more loft than lucidity. ("Victory at all costs": but how, exactly?) "We shall fight" is also a fine slogan—and yet a slogan is what it is. Churchill's greatest passages are exhortations before they are explanations, exercises in elemental morale building

rather than in explanatory eloquence.

In the "We Shall Fight" speech of June 4th, the exhortation is grounded in a slow buildup of blankly reported fact that includes a report to the nation, sparing none of the gruesome details of a defeat: "Our losses in matériel are enormous. We have perhaps lost one-third of the men we lost in the opening days of the battle of 21st March, 1918, but we have lost nearly as many guns—nearly one thousand—and all our transport, all the armored vehicles that were with the Army in the north." Even the repeated use of the verb "fight" obscures the real nature of the battle ahead. Fighting implies a fist cocked and a banner waved. But that wasn't the task at hand. The task at hand was standing and dying in a bombing attack, or waiting to be burned alive on the ground, or just doing without. Fighting was the action, but not the act.

It is not merely mischievous to point out that Churchill's language in 1940 employs almost all the elements that Orwell, in his fetishized essay on politics and language, from later in the decade, condemns: Churchill's rhetoric is dense with "dying metaphors" ("The light of history will shine on all your helmets" was his farewell to his War Cabinet), sentimental archaisms, and "pretentious diction." "A monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime"—this was exactly the sort of grandiosity that Orwell deplored. Yet it works. Words make sense only in context, and sentences find meaning only in circumstances. Churchill ought to sound absurdly archaic—"Every morn brought forth a noble chance /And every chance brought forth a noble knight," he says, quoting Tennyson in the middle of the June 4th speech. Instead, summoning up a bygone rhetoric, he places the day's horrors in a nation's history. The "monstrous tyranny" and the "lamentable catalogue" add to Churchill's trumpet a ground bass of memory—the history of the rhetoric of his own people.

Compare a typical, often praised speech by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin:

> Very little, if anything has been said to-day about one of the greatest difficulties which we find facing us in dealing with this question, and that is that fighting instinct which is part of human nature. I propose to say a few words about that first, with a view to explaining how, in my view, we have to attempt to eradicate it, or, at least, to combat it, so as to produce that will to peace without which all efforts by legislation, arbitration, rule or otherwise, must be vain. . . . We find it even among men whose political views can be classed as pacifist, and that is the reason why we have often found in history that men of pacifist views were advocating policies which must end, if carried to their logical conclusion, in war.

This has Orwellian virtues. It is lucid, clear, intelligent, and even subtle. It is also flat, fatuous, and commonplace, three things Churchill never is. Churchill was a cavalier statesman who could never survive roundhead strictures on ornament and theatrical excess in speaking. That's why he could supply what everyone needed in 1940: a style that would mark emphatic ends (there is no good news), conventional ideas (we are an ancient nation), and old-fashioned emphasis (we will fight). Perhaps the style never suited the time. It suited the moment. The archaic poetic allusions in the June 4th speech—the reference to King Arthur's knights, the echoes of Shakespeare and John of Gaunt's oration on England—are there to say, "What's to fear? We've been here before." The images *are* stale, the metaphors *are* violent, the atmosphere *is* dramatic—and the moment justifies them all. (And, when the instant was past, the speaking stopped; Churchill's important public oratory ceased even before the Battle of Britain was over.)

Churchill's telepathic sense of Hitler also allowed him to grasp that shaking a rhetorical fist in his face might make the dictator act with self-destructive rage. Peter Fleming, Ian's more gifted older brother, summed it up well in the decade after the war ended:

> It required no profound knowledge of the British character to realise that threats would strengthen rather than weaken their will to resist; but it did require more imagination than Hitler possessed to see what immense advantages might have been gained if in June 1940 he had turned his back on England instead of shaking his fist at her.

Churchill, understanding that Hitler wanted not just to conquer but to be recognized by the British Empire he admired, knew that he could provoke in Hitler the rage of a spurned suitor. When, in late August, a German bomber hit London, perhaps by accident, Churchill shrewdly retaliated, though to no particular harm, against Berlin—but the insult to Hitler's pride was so intense that he discarded the strategic plan to take out airfields and aircraft factories, and began the terror bombing of London, just to show them. This killed a lot of people, and let the R.A.F. regroup. The worst was over, and the war, though hardly won, would surely not be lost. "The forces that he has long been preparing he is now setting in motion, sooner than he intended," Gandalf says of his enemy, Sauron, after he has panicked him into acting too soon. "Wise fool." Wise fool, indeed.

Churchill, asked once what year he would like to relive, answered, "1940, every time, every time." It really was his finest hour. After that, the great speeches decline into a handful of brilliantly ironic remarks, and the battle-making became more dubious, to American eyes, anyway. Churchill's controversial leadership in the rest of the war is the main subject of Max Hastings's "Winston's War: Churchill 1940-1945" (Knopf; $35) and of Richard Holmes's "Churchill's Bunker" (Yale; $27.50). On the whole, Hastings, whose father was a well-known British wartime correspondent, is more sympathetic to Churchill's strategic outlook than most Americans were then or have been since. The central issue was simple: the Americans, from the time of their entry into the war, in 1941, wanted a decisive pitched land battle in which an Allied Army, designed to outnumber the Germans, would destroy them on a battlefield in Europe.

Hastings repeatedly makes the grim point that the British Army was, throughout the war, largely exhausted and unhappy with its leadership (as it demonstrated by throwing for Labour when it had the chance), and that Churchill knew it. He didn't want his soldiers or generals fighting big pitched battles, because he wasn't sure they had it in them. Instead, why not descend through Norway, or rise up through Sicily, or charge up on a knife edge through the Balkans, the "soft underbelly of the Axis," as Churchill called them? He always insisted that a brilliant stroke somewhere or other would produce a victory that he blanched to imagine in a pitched battle with the Wehrmacht. (Since Hitler had a similar love of the grand coup, he shared Churchill's Norwegian fantasy, and stationed many troops there, to little point, throughout the war.) The Americans believed that such gambits, though they might produce front-page "victories," would do little to advance the

real task of destroying the German Army.

Hastings ascribes Churchill's military preferences to his temperament—"He wanted war, like life, to be fun"—but surely the mystic chords of national memory played as large a role. British military history between Waterloo and the Great War was mostly peripheral, in the sense that relatively few pitched battles and lots and lots of opportunistic skirmishes, raids, and bluffs had made an empire. On the other hand, the strategy that the Americans believed in rhymed and chimed with the strategies of Sherman and Grant: find the enemy, attack him as directly, and stupidly, as necessary, lose men, make the enemy lose more, and then try to do it again the next day. Neither army was eager to waste lives. But the American theory of keeping men alive meant not throwing them away in sideshows; the British, not inserting them in meat grinders.

There is also the reality that warmaking, which ought to be the most brutally empirical of studies, is as likely to be caught up in theoretical moonshine as any department of English. Both Roosevelt and Churchill were convinced that sea power was decisive, even though, as Hitler had grasped, the combustion engine had made the old calculations moot. Churchill invested far too much emotion and money in special forces. And yet his fancies were not entirely foolish. He stubbornly supported the development of Hobart's Funnies, weird military contraptions. These included swimming tanks that would float on inflatable canvas water wings as they were unleashed from the landing craft, and then make their way ashore. (Other specialized tanks were equipped with flails for mine clearing.) Some Americans dismissed this as another piece of pointless Churchillian cleverness. Yet the tanks' presence helped explain why the British and Canadian advances on the morning of D Day went more smoothly than that of the Americans.

The other great question about Churchill involves his role at Yalta in 1945, the conference that divided Europe. Though it was anathematized as a betrayal by generations of Eastern Europeans, S. M. Plokhy's new book, "Yalta: The Price of Peace" (Viking; $29.95), makes a persuasive case that, given the Russian troops already in Poland and elsewhere, there was really nothing else to be done, and that Churchill actually played a pitifully weak hand rather well—keeping Greece, for instance, out of the Russian orbit simply on a handshake. "Decades after the conference, with the benefit of hindsight, new archival findings, and tons of research, it is still very difficult to suggest any practical alternative to the course that they took," Plokhy says of Churchill and F.D.R. There was a fine difference between Stalin and Satan, and Churchill grasped it. In Antony Beevor's history of the Battle of Stalingrad, the brutality and waste of the Stalinist regime—prisoners left to die in the snow, political commissars ordering the execution of innocents, the dead of the great purges haunting the whole—is sickening. But the murderousness of the Nazi invaders—children killed en masse and buried in common graves—is satanic. It is the tragedy of modern existence that we have to make such distinctions. Yet that does not mean that such distinctions cannot be made, or that Churchill did not make them. His moral instincts were uncanny. In 1944, after the deportation of the Jews from Hungary, when the specifics of the extermination camps were still largely unknown, he wrote that the Nazis' war on the Jews would turn out to be "probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world."

In 1945, just as the war was ending, Churchill was ejected by the British people, in an overwhelming victory for Labour. David Kynaston's "Austerity Britain: 1945-1951" (Walker; $45) tells the story of that defeat, and of the new Britain, largely indifferent to Churchill and his values, that emerged afterward. Yet there remains a central question: Why did the war exhaust the English economy while it energized the American one? Britain had worn itself out by fighting, spending its "treasure," the story goes—but there is no fixed sum of treasure in a country apart from its productivity, and Britain was building planes, too. Though Britain had to borrow the money from us, we had to borrow it from ourselves in the form of bonds and deficits.

Perhaps the question itself is misleading. Britain's statist approach took as its fundamental goal not the expansion of a consumer economy but the provision of health, education, and housing to a population long denied it. In Kynaston, one finds stories of cold homes and rationed butter—but also heady stories of boys and girls emerging from generations of endurance into new landscapes of opportunity. What was felt as austerity by some was felt as possibility by many more. Certainly, in every working-class memoir one reads—in Harold Evans's, in Keith Waterhouse's—the period is described as a long history of endurance met by a sudden explosion of ambition. While people who had been at Mrs. Dalloway's party before the war had a harder time buying the flowers and managing the servants, their sense of diminishment was the last thing that working-class boys evoke. Most American stories from the Depression are of interrupted good fortune: we lost the department store, the business, the farm, endured with F.D.R., and swelled again with Ike. The British stories tell of hanging on grimly through it all, just as we'd done as long as we could remember, until the war was over, and then our Alf got to go to university and Granny got false teeth from the National Health.

Yet in an odd way the Tory defeat in 1945 sealed Churchill's historical place: there and then gone. He did do more. Barbara Leaming, in her new biography of the older Churchill, "Churchill Defiant: Fighting On, 1945-1955" (HarperCollins; $26.99), italicizes what Lukacs has already established: that, in the early fifties, Churchill was desperate to make a "supreme effort to bridge the gulf between the two worlds" and seek some kind of European understanding with Stalin and then with his successors. He was defeated by the rigid anti-Communist ideology of Eisenhower and, particularly, his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. "This fellow preaches like a Methodist Minister," Churchill said of Dulles, in despair, "and his bloody text is always the same: That nothing but evil can come out of meeting with Malenkov"—the post-Stalin Russian leader. It was, it turns out, the ironclad Churchill who wanted to talk peace, and pragmatic Ike who was caught in a narrow ideological blinder.

What is Churchill's true legacy? Surely not that one should stand foursquare on all occasions and at all moments against something called appeasement. "The word 'appeasement' is not popular, but appeasement has its place in all policy," he

said in 1950. "Make sure you put it in the right place. Appease the weak, defy the strong." He argued that "appeasement from strength is magnanimous and noble and might be the surest and perhaps the only path to world peace." And he remarked on the painful irony: "When nations or individuals get strong they are often truculent and bullying, but when they are weak they become better-mannered. But this is the reverse of what is healthy and wise." Churchill's simplest aphorism, "To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war," was the essence of his position, as it was of any sane statesman raised in nineteenth-century balance-of-power politics. In the long history of the British Empire, there were endless people to make deals with and endless deals to be made, often with yesterday's terrorist or last week's enemy.

Churchill's real legacy lies elsewhere. He is, with de Gaulle, the greatest instance in modern times of the romantic-conservative temperament in power. The curious thing is that this temperament can at moments be more practical than its liberal opposite, or than its pragmatic-conservative twin, since it rightly concedes the primacy of ideas and passions, rather than interests and practicalities, in men's minds. Churchill was a student of history, but one whose reading allowed him to grasp when a new thing in history happened.

What is most impressive about his legacy, perhaps, is that he is one of the rare charismatic moderns who seem to have never toyed with extra-parliamentary movements or anti-liberal ideals. During all the years, and despite all the difficulties—in decades when the idea of Parliament as a fraud and a folly, a slow-footed relic of a dying age, was a standard faith of intellectuals on left and right alike—he remained a creature of rules and traditions who happily kissed the Queen's hand and accepted the people's verdict without complaint. Throughout the war, as Hitler retreated into his many bunkers and Stalin stormed and even Roosevelt concentrated power more and more in his single hand, Churchill accepted votes of confidence, endured fatuous parliamentary criticism, and meekly left office after triumphing in the most improbable of victories. A romantic visionary in constitutional spectacles can often see things as they are. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Quickening, *by Michelle Hoover (Other Press; $14.95).* In Hoover's début, the quiet struggle between two Midwestern farm women has the stark simplicity of a Biblical parable. After the First World War, stoic, industrious Enidina Current and her husband draw life from the hard earth of their fields, but at home Enidina suffers violent miscarriages. Their only neighbors for miles—Mary Morrow, bred to "walk in heels and carry cups of tea," and her tempestuous husband—have two boys. Mary, seeing refinement in the town's anemic preacher, bears him an illegitimate son, whose actions eventually set the two families against one another. If Hoover's symbolism, like the characters' heavy-handed surnames, is at times too overt, the book's lament for a lost way of life—one in which people "looked in hope to the ground and the roots growing there more often than we looked for grace from the sky"—has a mournful beauty.

The Lovers, *by Vendela Vida (Ecco; $23.99).* A middle-aged widow returns to the Turkish seaside town where she and her husband honeymooned twenty-eight years before, only to find the place gone to seed, haunted by sunburned Germans and mangy cats. At every turn, she is ambushed by evidence of other people's love, or lust, anyway. The owner of her rented villa has neglected to stow his sex swing or a naked photograph of his girlfriend; later, his estranged wife appears and too quickly divulges the secrets of their marriage. In a definitively bleak detail, even a spoon from the local ice-cream parlor tastes of "a century of tongues." Vida has made a specialty of lives in abeyance—this is her third novel in which a woman goes abroad in search of herself—and for much of the book her heroine simply drifts. It feels jarring, then, when, near the end, something happens and her character hurtles toward epiphany.

Young Romantics, *by Daisy Hay (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $27.50).* Hay examines the "turbulent communal existence" of the English Romantic poets, astutely parsing the intricate circumstances that led to this network's distinctive creative output; she shows, for instance, that "Frankenstein" emerged not merely out of fireside "conversations about ghosts and galvanism" but from ideas that Mary Shelley had been brewing for years. The book's most arresting insights concern the community's forays into free love, illuminated by the recently discovered memoir of Mary's stepsister Claire, who had an affair with Byron. The memoir, written decades after Shelley's death, is "viscerally angry" about the group's "experiments in living," and Hay sees it as providing a female perspective on an arrangement in which male dominance was taken for granted. Claire survived nearly everyone in the Shelleys' circle, dying in 1879, but her feelings of victimhood were not attenuated with age.

Interstate 69, *by Matt Dellinger (Scribner; $26).* Dellinger's nimble book chronicles the history of a largely unbuilt highway—if completed, it would stretch from the Canadian to the Mexican border—and tells the stories of the communities that stand to profit or to be imperilled by it. The narrative is sprawling by design, but the stories of determined individuals stand out from the complicated legislative history: David and Linda Stall bring together people in rural towns to protest the Trans-Texas corridor; Sandra and Thomas Tokarski fight against I-69 in Indiana from its initial proposal, in 1991, through the emergence of an anarchist anti-road movement in 2005. Most memorable are the impressions of faded conurbations, such as the newly tourist-friendly Clarksdale, Mississippi, and desperate El Dorado, Arkansas, where Murphy Oil promises to help pay for the college education of students who graduate from the public high schools.