

THE DITCHLEY FOUNDATION.

'CHURCHILL: ORATOR AND WORDSMITH!'

Peter Hennessy, FBA  
Attlee Professor of Contemporary British History  
Queen Mary, University of London

Ditchley

Saturday 14 November 2015

It is a great honour and true pleasure to be in your company today and to speak on Winston Churchill as orator and wordsmith and I'm very grateful to John and Penny for inviting me to do so.

Among many cherished things Ditchley has given those of us fortunate enough to have attended its conferences over the years is a sense of its powerful spirit of a place. The very walls talk whilst we sit and deliberate the vicissitudes and possibilities of the world as we currently find it there is – certainly for me – a hum of ancestral voices; especially of the giants on whose shoulders we seek to stand, as Sir Isaac Newton famously put it.

Perhaps the most lustrous, certainly the most famous, of those ancestral voices is the unmistakable growling drawl and extraordinary cadences of Winston Churchill here during wartime weekends 'when the moon was full' and Chequers an easily visible target for the Luftwaffe.

What a voice. What a presence. Words deployed for the highest of purposes – for succoring, sustaining and indeed saving the United Kingdom from defeat an tyranny. Churchill mobilized the English language as it had never been mobilized before in the service first of defiance and then of survival and, finally, victory.

Churchill the warrior/wordsmith lives on in the shared compost of the national memory. Any treatment of language – political or otherwise – has to touch up on his enduring resonance.

Here, for example, is the great neuroscientist, Sir Colin Blakemore, opening the chapter on language in his fascinating study, "The Mind Machine", the 'living word' as he titles it, quoting Churchill in full flight in Harrow in October 1941 addressing the boys of his old school:

*'Do not let us speak of darker days; let us speak rather of sterner days. These are not dark days. These are great days, the greatest days our country has ever lived; and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part in making these days memorable in the history of our race.'*

Professor Blakemore follows this with a quote from the great Ed Murrow, CBS's man in London during the Blitz of 1940. Churchill, said Murrow, 'mobilised the English language and sent it into battle'.

When he assumed the premiership in May 1940 after the fall of Norway, Churchill's word power instantly compensated for the many divisions we needed but did not possess. He was, in today's jargon, an undoubted force-multiplier and he remained so throughout the conflict. With his Coalition War Cabinet, he was, to use a phrase he liked, 'the point of the spear' of a huge wartime burst of stoical collective effort which was of immense significance not just for the people of Britain but to the whole world. As John Maynard Keynes put it:

*'We threw good housekeeping to the winds. But we saved ourselves and helped save the world.'*

Never, in my judgment, has a former superpower played its last great hand to better or more profound effect than Churchill-led Britain did in the year we stood alone between the fall of

France and Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union.

That bundle of gifts and characteristics, including his flaws, somehow crammed into the short, tubby Churchillian frame created one of the most remarkable enduring presences in the shared memory of the British people and, indeed, to this day, how people abroad imagine the UK. It was very striking, for example, during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in London 2¼ years ago that there was Winston Churchill, one of the triad of the UK's most potent brands – the other two being James Bond and Her Majesty the Queen who contrived to appear as if parachuting together into the Olympic Stadium in Stratford.

The anthropologist and soldier Tom Harrison, Co-founder of Mass Observation in the 1930's, described Churchill as a kind of 'intellectual deep shelter' for a Britain under the bombs. I reckon that deep shelter effect lasted deep into the peace. I was born in 1947 and I certainly felt it and still do. Generally, I think the shadow of Winston Churchill is one of the reasons we still aspire as a country to punch heavier than our weight in the world, as Douglas Hurd once famously put it, and why (myself again included) find it so difficult to engage in aspirational disarmament when it comes to foreign and defence policy and our place in the world.

Let's go back to our theme today – Churchill and his intoxication with the words of the English language. He couldn't help himself. It was innate. Whatever profession he had pursued words would have been his weapon, his delights and his marks of distinction. Indeed, he was a journalist before he became a politician.

Yet, of course, he knew from the experience of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, as well as his own instincts that, as my old boss William Rees-Mogg liked to say, 'words are the politician's bridges to power'. And in those days before every senior political player's words were captured in sound or picture, he could be – and was – a great recycler of word forms a truly ecological orator. And he got away with it. His friend and private secretary, Eddie Marsh, stored up the gems and the word patterns in his notebook.

It was that wittiest of Cambridge historians of Empire, Dr Ronald Hyam, who traced the rhetorical provenance of perhaps the most famous phrase Churchill ever uttered on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1940 in praise of RAF Fighter Command for their bravery and prowess in the Battle of Britain:

*'Never...in the history of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.'*

This, as Hyam showed, had been perfected over several trial runs. Here's a sprinkling of them:

1899, during the Oldham by-election (which he lost, though he won it at the general election the following year):

*'Never before were there so many people in England, and never before have they had so much to eat!'*

1906, speaking on Land Settlement in South Africa:

*'I do not think it very encouraging that we should have spent so much money on the settlement of so few.'*

1910, on Irish demands for Home Rule:

*'Never before has so little been asked and never before have so many asked for it!'*

And here's my favourite:

1908, on a dam at Ripon Falls across the Victoria Nile:

*'...nowhere else in the world could so enormous a mass of water be held up by so little masonry.'*

There is a clue here to an aspect of Churchill-as-orator which may surprise you. Churchill was the great master of the well-rehearsed spontaneity as opposed to the genuine spontaneity which is the apogee of political repartee. His friend and contemporary, F E Smith, who was the King of brilliant, biting repartee, once said of Churchill:

*'Winston has devoted the best years of his life to preparing his impromptu speeches.'*

Thanks to a conversation with Jonathan Aitken at last year's Gibraltar Literary Festival, I came across Churchill himself talking about this side of his wordsmithing deep in his old age. And it was to Jonathan that he explained it in 1962 at Cherkley, the home of Jonathan's great uncle, Lord Beaverbrook.

Jonathan had driven down from Oxford where he was an undergraduate and to his great delight and apprehension, Beaverbrook told Jonathan he would be sitting next to Churchill at dinner. He was particularly apprehensive when Uncle Max warned him that Churchill's a sick old man. You'll have to work hard to get anything out of him. But you never quite know. He's like a lighthouse. Long cycles of darkness but then, suddenly, a few short flashes of the old brilliance!

This, said Jonathan, turned out to be a highly accurate forecast. The old man, shrunken inside his blue siren suit, simply did not react to a succession of conversational gambits from Jonathan. Finally, he tried to interest Churchill in a piece the journalist Henry Fairlie had recently written about him. "What did it say?" asked Churchill. "That the key to your greatness lay in your oratory," Jonathan replied. Here Jonathan struck gold and he recorded the ensuing exchanges in his diary when he got back to College.

*'Fraid it's balls! I was never an orator. No, my boy, I was never a true orator. For when I rose to speak I always prepared meticulously. So afraid was I of making a slovenly speech that I often over prepared. When I was a young Member I polished my words so thoroughly that I could not bring myself to jettison a single sentence of my prepared speech, even when circumstances demanded it... I remember a terrible occasion when [Churchill was a Liberal MP at this stage] I attacked the Government for announcing a policy they had been expected to announce, but that they did not announce. So when A J Balfour [the Prime Minister] came to wind up the debate, he turned to me saying: "The Honourable Member has fired his guns down the road up which the enemy has not yet come." And I felt very small...'*

The grand old man, full of life now, turned to the year of his finest rhetorical hours:

*“You will remember, Max, in 1940, how many drafts and redrafts were needed before I was satisfied that my speeches could be delivered to the House of Commons or on the BBC. Those speeches performed their task but they were not oratory. I was never a bird on the unpinioned wing!”*

At this point, Churchill turned back to Jonathan beside him with what Jonathan called ‘a crescendo of comparisons’:

*‘You see, my boy, when I got up to speak I always knew precisely where every noun and adjective was going to go and how every piece of punctuation would feed into my speech. By contrast, the best Parliamentary orators like Lloyd George, F E Smith, Healy the Irishman, or even that shit Bevan... when they rose to speak they did not know where they would begin, they did not know how they would end, and they certainly did not know what they would say in the middle. For their phrases were dictated by some inner God within. That, my boy, is oratory!’*

Jonathan’s account – which you can find in his book “Heroes and Contemporaries”, records that at the end of this great peroration, Churchill’s head dropped back on to his chest and he fell back into dumb oblivion at which point Beaverbrook said:

*‘That was quite something. D’ya know what Winston like to say about his own conversations? He said “we are all worms but I do believe that I am a glow worm.”’*

Churchill, in fact, used to say ‘We are all worms in the eyes of God’, but the God bit seems to have slipped from Beaverbrook’s memory.

What is interesting about that Churchillian peroration at Cherkley, I think, is that it was spontaneous; and it was a kind of oratory.

I reckon his equivalent of the ‘inner God’ was the cornucopia of historical writing he had absorbed, particularly the historical writing he loved best which leapt from the pages of Gibbon and Macaulay. Like them, to adapt the catchphrase of the John Lewis Partnership, Churchill was never knowingly understated.

Last year, as part of the BBC’s series of programmes to mark the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, I made a documentary with Rob Shepherd for Radio 4 on ‘How Britain went to war’. We looked at the Army’s prescient and very accurate war gaming of such an event as early as 1905. We immersed ourselves in the papers, minutes and war books of the Committee of Imperial Defence, the National Security Council of its day.

But the most vivid section of the programme was when I stood in the wind at Hoxa Head on the Orkney island of South Ronaldsay – the entry to the great natural harbor of Scapa Flow – and recorded Churchill’s description of his sending the Fleet to its war station as First Lord of the Admiralty, with Prime Minister Asquith’s permission, at the end of July 1914, a few days before the actual outbreak of the Great War.

Have a listen; the words are taken from Churchill's book, "The World Crisis":

*'We may now picture this great fleet with its flotillas of cruisers steaming slowly out of Portland harbor, squadron by squadron, scores of gigantic castles of steel wending their way across misty, shining sea, like giants bowed in anxious thought. We may picture them again, as darkness fell, eighteen miles of warships running at high speed and in absolute darkness through the narrow straits [of Dover], bearing with them into the broad waters of the North the safeguard of considerable affairs.'*

*'The strategic' concentration of the fleet had been accomplished with its transfer to Scottish waters. We were now in a position, whatever happened, to control events and it was not easy to see how this advantage could be taken from us...*

*'If war should come, no one would know where to look for the British fleet. Somewhere in that enormous waste of waters to the north of our islands, cruising now this way, now that, shrouded in storms and mists, dwelt this mighty organization. The King's ships were at sea.'*

Powerful stuff.

Churchill relished his visits to Scapa Flow and the Grand Fleet in both world wars. In fact, he went straight there from one of his Ditchley 'when the moon was full' weekends, during which he had entertained Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's special confidante and crucial in the early weeks of 1941 in persuading the President to talk to Congress about Lend-Lease for the embattled UK. Hopkins accompanied Mr and Mrs Churchill on their special train to Thurso and across to Scapa where, hopping from ship to ship, Hopkins nearly fell in to icy waters of the Flow which would have strained the special relationship just a tad.

Churchill adored visiting the King's soldiers, sailors and airmen. In addition to his incomparable words, he always brought with him an array of props and trademarks. The uniforms. The hats. The unlit cigar. The endless V for Victory signs. The walking stick on which, amongst bigger crowds, he would pace his headgear of the day before raising the stick high so that the throng could see where he was.

During his last premiership between 1951 and 1955 a couple of his in-house props in Downing Street, Rufus the Poodle and Toby the Budgerigar, were truly disagreeable. His greatest prop – his most magnificent stage – was, of course, the House of Commons. He was in love with it. Listen to this love song to the Commons in March 1917 at a particularly grim stage of the Great War. It comes from the diary of a fellow Liberal MP, McCallum Scott. It's a piece of Churchill brilliance I use as often as I can when I got to speak to undergraduates or sixth-formers in this age in which so often the purposes of Parliament and the often disappointing ways of those who people it are held in such disdain by sections of the public:

*'As we were leaving the House that night he [Churchill] called me into the Chamber to take a last look round. All was darkness except a ray of faint light all around under the gallery. He could dimly see the Table but walls and roof were invisible. "Look at it," he said. "This little place is what makes the difference between us and Germany. It is in virtue of this that we shall muddle through to success and for lack of this Germany's brilliant efficiency leads her to final destruction. This little room is the shrine of world's liberties."'*

For me, it's another example of his unforced, unprepared natural oratory. Wonderful stuff. Churchill was romantic about pretty well every moving part of the British Constitution. And he really was in love with the beautiful young Queen during his twilight premiership in the early 1950's. His weekly audiences got longer and longer.

Let's take a look at the document you have before you – at Churchill's speaking notes for his speech delivered in Dover as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1946. I was given a copy by a deceased friend of mine – a very distinguished diplomat – who had inherited it, I think, from a relative.

Notice Churchill's habit of arranging its passages as if it were poetry, which in a way it was. Note too his own version of shorthand. Almost every line is dripping with history and the 'weaknesses and peculiarities' of we Brits as well as our 'virtue and strength'.

He plainly enjoyed his elaborate running gag about his Pooh Bear status as Lord Warden who, could always turn to the Minister of defence (ie himself) and both, in extremis, could appeal to the occupant of 10 Downing Street.

It's plain on page 3 that he loved leading the all-party World War II Coalition government. Churchill was a natural coalitionist. He was once described as a politician without a fixed abode. He adored working, for example, with the great trade union leader, Ernest Bevin, Minister of Labour in the War Cabinet and he wanted the wartime coalition to carry on until at least the war with Japan was won but the Labour Party favoured a swift general election instead. And when he returned to office in October 1951 he tried – and failed – to persuade his Conservative colleagues that a scattering of Liberals should be brought in – Clem Davies, the Liberal Leader, his beloved and formidable Lady Violet Bonham-Carter and, he tried to get Cyril Asquith, son of the great H H Asquith, to serve as Lord Chancellor.

I relish, too, Winston recalling on page 8 the smashed crockery of the restaurant in wartime Margate. I suspect he had a little cry when he saw that. Churchill was a great blubber. The Margate episode reminds me of the story of Churchill being driven down to Chartwell on a Friday through the South London boroughs and seeing a long queue outside a pet shop. He stopped the car and sent the private secretary to investigate. The young man reported that word had got around that a consignment of birdseed had arrived. People were queuing to get food for their budgerigars. The old man wept.

Every time I read the Cinque Ports speech, I notice something new. He crafted it almost exactly a year after the atomic weapons dropped on Japan plunged us all under the shadow of the Bomb. And here is Churchill's encapsulation of deterrence theory on page 13 in the context of the chilling Cold War:

*'Secrets hv bn wrested fm Nature  
wh ought to awe and prevent  
the quarrels of mankind,*

*even if they cannot assuage  
their rivalries and suspicions.'*

His final speech in the House of Commons, delivered on 1 March 1955 in the last days of his last premiership – 45 minutes worth; every word sculpted by himself and dictated to his secretary, Miss Portal, now Lady Williams of Elvel – was devoted to the perils of the even more powerful hydrogen bomb, which in the very Defence White Paper the Commons was debating it had been announced Britain was making.

Here is his peroration:

*'The day may dawn when fair play, love for one's fellow men, respect for justice and freedom, will enable tormented generations to march forth serene and triumphant from the hideous epoch in which we have to dwell. Meanwhile, never flinch, never weary, never despair.'*

Would the Churchillian magic work today if we had anybody remotely like him in public and political life? Certainly not on television – a medium which he hated. Just imagine if a party leaders' debate had existed in 1950 or 1951 when he and Clem Attlee were party leaders. Attlee had all the charisma and presence of a gerbil and, as his No 10 Assistant, Douglas Jay, put it, a tendency 'never to use one syllable where none would do'.

May I finish by praying in aid a politician, historian and biographer of the first rank, Roy Jenkins. Roy has left us three especially lustrous political biographies – his lives of Asquith and Gladstone and the final one of his oeuvre, Churchill.

Roy finished his life of Churchill by comparing his to Gladstone – Churchill as the greatest prime minister of the twentieth century and Gladstone as the greatest of the nineteenth:

*'When I started writing this book I thought that Gladstone was, by a narrow margin, the greater man, certainly the more remarkable specimen of humanity. In the course of writing it I have changed my mind.'*

*'I now put Churchill, with all his idiosyncrasies, his indulgences, his occasional childishness, but also his genius, his tenacity and his persistent ability right or wrong, successful or unsuccessful, to be larger than life, as the greatest human being ever to occupy 10 Downing Street.'*

Amen to that.

In terms of saving his country, his spirit, his genius for words, his enduring repute – in historical terms, Winston Churchill's moon will always be full and the walls of our beloved Ditchley will forever resonate with the glorious echoes of his supreme word power.