

The Speeches of Winston Churchill



Edited and with an introduction by David Cannadine

# Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat

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with an Introduction by

DAVID CANNADINE



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### **Preface**

During the last two decades of his life, Winston Churchill was widely acclaimed as 'the greatest Englishman of his time'. His death was mourned by millions around the world, and he remains to this day Britannia's most celebrated son. The flood of books and articles about him continues unabated, and the public appetite for more is both voracious and insatiable. Each year, hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world visit Blenheim, Chartwell, Bladon and the Cabinet War Rooms in London. The adjective 'Churchillian' and the noun 'Churchilliana' are now authoritatively accommodated between the covers of the new edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. Ships in the Royal Navy are named after him, as are cigarettes and public houses. His life is the subject of films, television series and even West End musicals. His books are still avidly and appreciatively read. His paintings command high prices in the salerooms. His most famous words have become immortal.

Yet there is no single-volume edition of his most important speeches, and the purpose of this book is to provide one. I am most grateful to Anne Boyd of Cassell for first suggesting this appealing project to me, and for her unfailing enthusiasm, encouragement and assistance thereafter. Mike Shaw of Curtis Brown has been both a tower of strength and a pillar of wisdom. I am also very heavily indebted to Dr David Reynolds, of Christ's College, Cambridge, for many memorable and illuminating conversations on the subject of Winston Churchill, and for his personal kindness no less than for his intellectual generosity. Clare Kudera provided invaluable research assistance at a crucial stage. But, once again, my greatest debt is to Linda Colley.

DNC New Haven New Year's Eve, 1988

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INSTON CHURCHILL was the most eloquent and expressive statesman of his time, truly both the master and the slave of the English language. Indeed, his extraordinary career may most fittingly be regarded as one magnificent and magniloquent monologue. Day after day, and often night after night, he poured forth words and phrases in tumultuous torrent and inexhaustible abundance - inspiring, exhorting, moving, persuading, cajoling, thundering, bullying, abusing and enraging. In private engagement or public appearance, Cabinet meeting or Commons debate, car or boat, train or plane, dining-room or drawing-room, bedroom or bathroom, his flow of oratory never ceased. Dozens of books, scores of articles, numerous state papers and countless memoranda bear what is literally the most eloquent witness to his unfailing verbal resource, to his prodigious rhetorical ingenuity and to his lifelong love of language. From the time of his election to the House of Commons in 1900, until his very last weeks as Prime Minister in 1955, Churchill was a man of whom it could quite properly be said that he never seemed at a loss for words.

Because he was essentially a rhetorician, who declaimed and dictated virtually every sentence he composed, most of his words were spoken rather than written. But some were more spoken than others. For it was as an orator that Churchill became most fully and completely alive, and it was through his oratory that his words and his phrases made their greatest and most enduring impact. With Churchill as with Gladstone, 'speech was the very fibre of his being'. During his own lifetime, more of his oratory was published in book form than that of any other political contemporary. The definitive edition of his speeches runs to eight vast volumes, containing well over four million words. And his most memorable phrases – not just 'blood, toil, tears and sweat', 'their finest hour', 'the few', and 'the end of the beginning', but also 'business as usual', 'iron curtain', 'summit meeting' and 'peaceful co-existence' – have become part of the everyday vocabulary

of millions of men and women. As Churchill himself once remarked, 'words are the only things which last for ever'. In his case, at least, this confident prediction has also become a fitting and incontrovertible epitaph.

I

Yet despite the unrivalled mastery of the spoken word which Churchill eventually achieved, he was in no sense a born orator. As a young man, it seemed inconceivable that he would ever impress as a public figure or excel as a public speaker. He was physically unprepossessing and uncharismatic, not much above five feet tall, with a hunched frame, a stooping walk, a weak upper lip, a delicate skin and a waistline which became self-indulgently expanded in middle age. He felt deeply his lack of an Oxbridge education - partly because it left him with an abiding sense of intellectual inferiority, and partly because it meant he 'never had the practice which comes to young men at university of speaking in small debating societies impromptu on all sorts of subjects'. Except for making a few brief remarks at social gatherings, he never mastered the art of extemporaneous public speaking. Most distressing of all, his voice was unattractive and unresonant, and he suffered from a speech impediment, part lisp and part stammer. As one candid observer noted early in his career, he was 'a medium-sized, undistinguished young man, with an unfortunate lisp in his voice . . . and he lacks face'.

The main reason why Churchill's oratory eventually took the particular form it did was that he had to overcome these debilitating disadvantages. He only mastered his chosen craft by 'hard, hard work', and by serving a 'long and painful apprenticeship'. He studied - and often memorized - the greatest orations of Cromwell, Chatham, Burke, Pitt, Macaulay, Bright, Disraeli and Gladstone. He knew his father's speeches off by heart, and deliberately emulated his dress and his mannerisms. He laboured heroically to overcome his lisp and his stammer, by visiting several voice specialists, by constant practice and perseverance, and by choosing unusual words and phrases so as to avoid the treacherous rhythms of everyday speech. He spent hours in front of the looking-glass, rehearsing his gestures and practising his facial expressions. Despite this monumental dedication, he was always afraid, in his early years, that he would blurt out some unpremeditated and inappropriate remarks in the Commons; and to the very end of his career he remained apprehensive before making any major speech, and

was always on edge until he was satisfied that his words had not misfired.

Above all, he was obliged to lavish hours on the detailed construction of the speeches themselves. Whether delivered in the Commons, on the platform or at the microphone, Churchill's orations were neither the effortless effusions of an accomplished extempore speaker, nor the rambling remarks of someone thinking vaguely and incoherently aloud. They were formal literary compositions, dictated in full beforehand, lovingly revised and polished, and delivered from a complete text which often included stage directions. As such, they were meticulously constructed set-pieces, carefully planned from beginning to end, with ample documentation to support the case being made, and with the arguments flowing in ordered sequence, until the peroration was finally reached. Inevitably, this process occupied a great deal of Churchill's time. His first major speech in the Commons took six weeks to put together, and even during the darkest and busiest days of the Second World War, he was never prepared to shirk or skimp the task of composition. Although he sometimes made speeches which were unsuccessful, he hardly ever made a slovenly one.

To this extent, Churchill mastered the techniques of speech-writing and speech-making in ways that best compensated for his physical, temperamental and intellectual disadvantages. But he also fashioned a personal style which was essentially his own. He began by combining the stately, rolling sentences of Gibbon with the sharp antitheses and pungent wit of Macaulay, the two authors he had read so carefully during his days as a soldier in India. Among living orators, he was most indebted to Bourke Cockran, an Irish-American politician out of Tammany Hall, whose best speeches were even more eloquent than those of William Jennings Bryan. The resounding perorations which soon became such a marked feature of Churchill's utterances were modelled on those of the Younger Pitt and Gladstone, while for invective and vituperation, there was always the strikingly successful example of his father, Lord Randolph. To this exceptionally heady mixture, Churchill added his own personal ingredients: detail, humour and deliberate commonplace. The result, as Harold Nicolson noted, was a remarkably arresting 'combination of great flights of oratory with sudden swoops into the intimate and the conversational'.

In addition, Churchill was himself a true artist with words. For a self-educated man, no less than for a career politician, his vocabulary was uncommonly large. From the time when he was an otherwise

unpromising schoolboy at Harrow, he took an almost sensuous delight in military metaphors, arresting alliterations, polished phrases, sharp antitheses and explosive epigrams. His speeches, like his paintings, were full of vivid imagery and rich colour. He loved short, strong, robust nouns: 'blood, toil, tears and sweat'. He relished evocative, assertive and often bookish adjectives: 'silent, mournful, abandoned, broken'. He became the master of the unexpected but apt choice of word, as in his description of the Mississippi as 'inexorable, irresistible, benignant', where the last, unusual adjective breaks the predictable alliterative pattern to great effect. Above all, he was unrivalled among his political contemporaries as a fertile maker of memorable phrases. His remark at the time of the General Strike, 'I decline utterly to be impartial as between the fire brigade and the fire', is one well-known example. And his later description of Russia as being 'a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma' is another.

The combined result of such remorseless determination, diligent application and consummate artistry was that Churchill very rapidly acquired the most rhetorical style of any statesman in British history. From department to department, from one crisis to another, from government to opposition, he took his glittering phrases with him, modifying and reworking well-tried word patterns to meet new circumstances. Consider his famous panegyric on the Battle of Britain fighter pilots in 1940: 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed, by so many, to so few' - a sentence of classic simplicity and seemingly effortless perfection. But it had been through many different permutations before reaching its final form. 'Never before', he observed at Oldham in 1899, 'were there so many people in England, and never before have they had so much to eat.' Nine years later, as Colonial Under-Secretary, he made this comment on a projected irrigation scheme in Africa: 'Nowhere else in the world could so enormous a mass of water be held up by so little masonry.' One of the reasons why his rhetoric flowed so easily and so splendidly in 1940, when Churchill was a titanically busy man, was that so many of the phrases and sentences were already there, just waiting to be used.

But they were also there because they exactly expressed his true personality. For Churchill's speeches were not just accomplished technical exercises in rhetorical composition, verbal ingenuity and public histrionics. He also spoke in the language he did because it vividly and directly reflected the kind of person he himself actually was. His own

extraordinary character breathed through every grandiloquent sentence – a character at once simple, ardent, innocent and incapable of deception or intrigue, yet also a character larger than life, romantic, chivalrous, heroic, great-hearted and highly coloured. As Asquith's daughter Violet noted, shortly after meeting him in the 1900s, 'There was nothing false, inflated or artificial in his eloquence. It was his natural idiom. His world was built and fashioned on heroic lines. He spoke its language.' In 1940, Vita Sackville-West was comforted by essentially the same thought: 'One of the reasons why one is stirred by his Elizabethan phrases is that one feels the whole massive backing of power and resolve behind them, like a great fortress: they are never words for words' sake.'

For all these reasons, Churchill's oratory soon became a remarkably well-tuned and well-practised political instrument. Indeed, considering that he never built up a regional power base in the country or a personal following at Westminster, that he changed his party allegiance twice, that his judgement was often faulty, that his administrative talents were uneven, and that his understanding of ordinary people was minimal, it is arguable that oratory was, in fact, his only real instrument. It enabled him to make his reputation as a young MP, to survive the vicissitudes of the First World War, to recover his position in the 1920s, to wage his solitary campaign against appeasement, to rally the forces of freedom during the Second World War, and to play the part of world statesman in the years which followed. At best, by sheer force of eloquence, he imposed his own vision, and his own personality, on men and on events. He expressed noble sentiments in incomparably eloquent speeches which possessed a unique quality of formal magnificence. For Churchill was not just speaking for the moment, however important that was: he was also speaking for posterity. The very existence of this volume is emphatic proof of how successfully he achieved that aim.

H

Nevertheless, despite the remarkable and transcendent qualities of Churchill's speeches, the fact remains that for much of his career they were ultimately ineffective, in that they did not enable him to achieve his supreme ambition of becoming Prime Minister. For all its undeniable brilliance, the very nature of his oratory actually made it harder for him to get to the top in public life. In part, no doubt, this was because his glittering phrases, his polished performances and his

unconcealed delight in his own hard-won oratorical prowess provoked a great deal of envy in the great majority of lesser and duller men. It was also true that for most of his career his speeches frequently failed to persuade, and regularly offended and antagonized at least as much as they captivated and impressed. As one MP remarked in 1935, 'When the Rt. Hon. Gentleman speaks ... the House always crowds in to hear him. It listens and admires. It laughs when he would have it laugh, and it trembles when he would have it tremble ... but it remains unconvinced, and in the end it votes against him.' What were the defects of Churchill's oratory which meant that this appreciative but damning verdict held so true for so much of his public life?

Part of the problem was that the very luxuriance of Churchill's rhetoric, the disconcerting ease with which it was so readily mobilized in support of so many varied and even contradictory causes, only served to reinforce the view - which became widespread very early in his career, and which lasted to 1940 and beyond - that he was a man of unstable temperament and defective judgement, completely lacking in any real sense of proportion. It was not just that he constantly yearned for excitement and action, and that he exaggerated the importance of everything he touched. It was also that his rhetoric often seemed to obscure his reason, and that his phrases mastered him, rather than he them. Any policy, any scheme, any adventure which could be presented with rhetorical attractiveness immediately appealed to him, regardless of its substantive merits - or drawbacks. As Charles Masterman complained, 'he can convince himself of almost every truth if it is once allowed to start on its wild career through his rhetorical machinery'. All too often, he seemed to be guilty of the charge which Disraeli had levelled at Gladstone, of being merely 'a sophisticated rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity'.

A further difficulty was that, by their very nature, his Commons orations were dramatic, theatrical set-piece speeches, which were ill-suited to the essentially intimate, domestic, conversational atmosphere of parliamentary debate. As Clement Attlee once remarked, they were 'magnificent rhetorical performances, but ... too stately, too pompous, too elaborate, to be ideal House of Commons stuff'. They were an impressive exposition of his own views, they read superbly in *Hansard*, and they have captivated posterity; but they rarely reflected the mood of the House, they often contributed little or nothing to the debate itself, and they were sometimes completely out of place. On several occasions, this resulted in conspicuous parliamentary humiliation,

when he failed to anticipate the mood of the Commons correctly, but was so tied to his text that he could only plough on inexorably towards disaster. Early in his career, Balfour poured scorn on Churchill's 'powerful but not very mobile artillery', and much later, Aneurin Bevan, using the same metaphor, complained that 'he had to wheel himself up to battle, like an enormous gun'.

In addition, Churchill's highly polished words often gave the very greatest offence and only reinforced another widespread criticism, that he was almost completely insensitive to the feelings of others. For his invective was (in Balfour's words) 'both prepared and violent,' something which his victims neither forgot nor forgave. Early in his career, in a pompous and patronizing speech, he dismissed Lord Milner, the darling of the British establishment, as 'a guilty Parnell'. In the late 1920s, he brutally described Ramsay MacDonald as 'the boneless wonder'. Soon after, he caricatured Gandhi as 'a seditious Middle Temple lawyer', a 'half-naked fakir'. In 1945, there was his notorious 'Gestapo' jibe at his Labour opponents in his first party political broadcast of the general election. And four years later, he mounted a swingeing attack on Cripps, the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, and his former colleague in the wartime coalition, in the aftermath of devaluation. As Attlee once remarked, 'Mr Churchill is a great master of words, but it is a terrible thing when the master of words becomes a slave of words, because there is nothing behind these words, they are iust words of abuse.'

Much of Churchill's oratory was also implausibly pessimistic and apocalyptically gloomy. In lurid and vivid phrases, he depicted a succession of terrible threats to the very survival of the British nation and Empire: the Bolsheviks, the trade unions, the Indian nationalists, the Nazis, the post-war Labour governments and the atomic bomb. Each one was for him the most dire and deadly peril. And he described them in very similar language. 'On we go,' he thundered in 1931, when the danger was India, but it might equally well have been Germany, 'moving slowly in a leisurely manner, towards an unworkable conclusion, crawling methodically towards the abyss.' But it was not just, as Leo Amery remarked, that many of these speeches were 'utterly and entirely negative, and devoid of all constructive thought'. It was also that many of these menaces were at best exaggerated and at worst quite imaginary. By using phrases so similar to describe threats so varied and sometimes so implausible, Churchill effectively devalued his own rhetoric of alarmism by crying wolf too often. No wonder MPS did not