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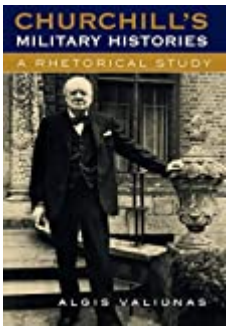

Algis Valiunas. *Churchill's Military Histories: A Rhetorical Study.* Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. x + 198 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2104-9.

Reviewed by Ernest Teagarden (Emeritus, Dakota State University)

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"The signal feature of Churchill's histories," says Algis Valiunas in his introduction to the book, "is the way they maintain an aristocratic perspective in democratic times without losing their democratic sympathies" (p. 2). This is an excellent encapsulation. Valiunas looks at the literary output of Churchill's talent at various times in his professional life and applies meaning to what he had to say.

Valiunas starts with four books written while Churchill was a soldier and correspondent in turn-of-the-century South Africa and Sudan. These are: *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (1898); *The River War* (1899); *The Boer War* (1900); and *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (1930). Churchill followed his imperialistic period with a six-volume saga of the First World War, the virtually unknown *The World Crisis* (1922-1929). *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, a four-volume tribute to his distinguished ancestor, came in 1933-1935. *A History of the English Speaking Peoples* was written between 1956 and 1958. Churchill's biggest seller, the six-volume, *The Second World War* (1948-1953) featured letters, dispatches, and reports interspersed with the text.

Churchill believed it was the responsibility of every British citizen to improve the lot of conquered Africans and Asians. He subscribed to Kipling's concept of the "white man's burden." Bloody intertribal wars had to cease. The favorable influence of Christianity needed secular support. Slavery and the slave trade, especially in the Sudan, must be destroyed. Britain might have to use harsh measures to get the job done, but once completed, the life situation of the local inhabitants would be much improved. Unlike some other European nations, Britain had the welfare of the native at heart. The Boers, for example, did nothing for the native population. The Boers also were indolent, isolationist property stewards who destroyed farms by poor husbandry and then moved elsewhere to repeat the process. There were, however, those persons in England who did not agree with Churchill about British colonial aspirations and motivations. They saw economic exploitation at every turn. Cecil Rhodes was a nasty imperialist to these people.

Churchill in his largely forgotten *World Crisis* contrasts the small-scale imperialistic wars with the scope and horrendousness of the First World War. Like historians before and since, he blames the cause and direction of this conflict on a lack of quality and an impurity of motivation on the part of each participant. Recklessness and a lack of accountability was the order of the day. Count Berchtold, the Austrian foreign minister obsessed with destroying Serbia, and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany with his "blank check" to Austria, must share the blame for the start of the war. Many persons, espe-

cially incompetent military leadership, had responsibility for its misconduct. The slaughter could have been diminished had the warlords used better judgment.

Chapter 4 reflects on the career of Winston's most famous ancestor, John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722). 000Valiunas regards *Marlborough: His Life and Times* as an "act of homage" to his ancestor, as, indeed, it is. John Churchill's marriage to Sarah Jennings, an intimate of Princess (later Queen) Anne provided place and position to Marlborough. His military exploits against the French, often in conjunction with unreliable allies, became legendary. Every English schoolboy is given the opportunity to learn about Marlborough's victories in the War of the Spanish Succession. His successes at Blenheim, Ramilles, Oudenarde, and Malplaquet are legendary. When Sarah successfully represented his interests at home while he was battling abroad, things went well. When Sarah fell out with Queen Anne over Tory/Whig politics, Marlborough lost his commanding position and was even charged with military payroll manipulation. The War of Spanish Succession ended with the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Marlborough predicted the treaty would be a failure and more wars would follow. He was correct. When in power, he controlled events, as Winston said great men usually do.

Churchill had his years in the wilderness during the 1930s. He was not included in the Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain governments. Neither these leaders nor their supporters shared his views on appeasement or rearmament. He was not considered politically correct. Churchill had more time to spend on literary efforts and he did so. The Marlborough work was done during this time and Churchill began his multi-volume effort, *History of the English Speaking Peoples*. This series, completed in 1958, covered the years beginning with Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain in 35 B.C. and ending during the course of the Boer War in 1902. Valiunas and Churchill saw this time span largely in terms of great men in difficult situations. Churchill compares and contrasts Alfred the Great (871-899), who led men into battle, with pious and "easy-going" leaders such as Ethelred (978-1016) and Edward the Confessor (899-924). William the Conqueror (1066-1087), warrior and Christian, fit Churchill's mold of a great man. Henry V (1413-1422) and Elizabeth I (1558-1603) also appealed to Churchill. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) and the Duke of Wellington (1769-1852) were non-royal military successes although Cromwell's villainy in Ireland, particularly the massacre at Drogheda, was unconscionable. In the American Civil War, Churchill has regard for both Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln, but wishes they had not interfered in campaign strategy and battle tactics. Robert E. Lee fought the war with more finesse than Ulysses S. Grant. He considered Grant as little more than a simple assault and attrition-type general, something akin to Haig and Joffre during the First World War. The leading figure in the Crimea was the benevolent nurse Florence Nightingale, which says something about the military talent available during the war. Lord Roberts turned the tide of the Boer War from Boer farmer to British regular. Churchill has been chastised for not saying more about the development of democratic institutions in the Commonwealth nations. Their historians must realize that it was a monumental task to get what he did into four volumes.

Churchill's magnum opus was surely his six-volume, *The Second World War* (1948-1953). It seems to be Valiunas's magnum opus as well, for he devotes about 30 percent of his book to this event. It is a popular series although one must wonder how many people have read all six volumes. There are many sets and individual volumes for sale on the internet, ranging from paperbacks to $1000 for an attractive black and gold first edition. Certainly, many know Churchill through this set of books. Its sales may have exceeded the sales of his other books in combination.

Valiunas points out, and rightly so, that in 1940 and 1941 Churchill's rhetoric reached its high point. Whether written or orally presented, it was what the British people needed to hear. Probably no other person could have done so well. From not being "sound," to use an expression popular in British governmental circles, Churchill, became in 1940, Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury, Minister of Defense and Leader of the House of Commons. He was in a position of knowing what was happening. As Valiunas notes, Churchill himself, became the "great man" who made decisions which affected the outcome of the war.

Churchill saw the war from a height which made it possible to concentrate on large events and achievements, but largely ignore the hospitals full of wounded and graveyards full of dead British soldiers, sailors, and airmen. Valiunas contrasts him to Walt Whitman and Churchill's own principal biographer, Martin Gilbert. They are more realistic about the evils of modern warfare than Churchill. In volume 2, *Their Finest Hour*, Churchill pays tribute to the bravery and fortitude of the British people during the Battle of Britain. But, as Valiunas astutely points out, this was the only time they received such laudatory recognition. Would they have done so

well if they had not had Churchill to lead them? Was he strictly a wartime leader? As soon as the war ended he was removed from office by the electorate and a Labour government was installed.

Valiunas's *Churchill's Military Histories: A Rhetorical Study* is a hardback book of 208 pages that carries a price tag of $30.00. This cost for a 208-page book probably limits its sales to Churchill aficionados, history professionals interested in the field, and libraries, especially collegiate. Many general readers picture academic works in terms of turgid prose, containing a forest of footnotes, and finished off with a bibliography which seems endless. This is not Valiunas at all. He writes in a fluid and eloquent style. His prose is clear and understandable. Actually, for anyone interested in the facts about Churchill's literary life, he or she can get a pretty good survey from the Valiunas book.

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