



Churchill and the Dardanelles by Christopher M. Bell.

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Churchill and the Dardanelles tells a story of political redemption. In 1914, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, was confident he would emerge from World War I as great leader, strategist, and statesman, only to find in 1915 that he was none of these. His refusal to accept the verdict of failure shaped his subsequent political career as his impetuous ambition was tempered by calculating maturity (369-70). Noted naval historian Christopher Bell¹ (Univ. of Halifax) has now written a meticulously researched, lucidly argued, and soberly objective study of that transformation. He was inspired to do so “by a sense of unfinished business” after publishing his *Churchill and Seapower*,² which gave little space to the disastrous Dardanelles sea and land campaigns.

In fifteen chapters,³ Bell examines in exhaustive detail a specific episode of Churchill’s apprenticeship in military and political leadership in war thirty years before the crowning triumph of his career in 1945. He begins by observing that the scholarly literature on the Dardanelles campaign features two competing narratives: in one, Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, was a headstrong amateur strategist who ignored the advice of First Sea Lord John Arbuthnot “Jacky” Fisher and his admirals by plunging into one of the worst disasters in the history of British arms; in the other, Churchill’s Dardanelles plan was a strategically sound alternative to the slaughter on the Western Front, but was scuttled by timorous naval leaders and poor execution. Neither narrative withstands scrutiny (3).

Bell carefully investigates the evidence on both sides. He begins with the events between the outbreak of the Great War and Churchill’s ouster from the Admiralty in May 1915, using contemporary documents to establish a record “as far as possible, undistorted by the claims and counter-claims made later in full knowledge of the campaigns’ [sic] failure” (5-6). He then turns to the story of Churchill’s Dardanelles gambit and his efforts to defend its strategic logic after the fact, as his public image evolved from romantic adventurer to a safe replacement for Neville Chamberlain in Britain’s hour of peril in 1940 (9-11).

The book is partly a study of personality. Quite rightly, if, as Eliot Cohen has argued,⁴ it was Churchill’s “indomitable spirit” that ultimately made him “the greatest war statesman of the century.” From this standpoint, Churchill’s rampant ambition in the cabinet of Herbert Asquith in 1914-15 was abetted by the cabinet’s faith in nineteenth-century Britain’s tradition of “limited liability” warfare with “minimal disruption to the economy and the lives of the British people” (17).

1. He has written or edited several earlier books, including *The Royal Navy: Seapower and Strategy between the Wars* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 2000).

2. New York: Oxford U Pr, 2012.

3. The book also contains twenty illustrations and photographs, four maps, forty-one pages of notes, a select bibliography, and an index.

4. In *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (NY: Free Press, 2002) 132.

But Churchill was “temperamentally ill-suited to preside over a predominantly passive naval strategy” (25), given his love of war, romantic notions of heroic leadership, and hyperactive approach to his duties during the frustrating strategic stalemate of autumn 1914 (12–47).

Bell does not exonerate Churchill of culpability for sponsoring the Dardanelles expedition as a solution for this stalemate, but he does put his actions in a broader context. At the end of 1914, Churchill was in fact contemplating a plan to outflank Germany with an attack via the North Sea or the Baltic. Meanwhile, Maurice Hankey, Secretary of the War Council, and David Lloyd George, heading the Exchequer, sought ways to capitalize on British sea power, not least in the Balkans or Middle East. Still, once Churchill fixated on the Dardanelles initiative, he met little effective opposition:

The chorus of complaints from senior members of the naval staff points to a “system failure” at the Admiralty by early 1915. The responsibility for this state of affairs rests primarily with Churchill, who had constructed the system and selected the individuals who filled the senior posts. At the root of the problem was his desire to dominate the central decision-making process and initiate major operations himself, even when he encountered opposition from senior officers. (65)

By contrast with World War II, when Churchill’s advisors were able to restrain and direct his energies, such men were thin on the ground in 1915. Bell finds little evidence that even so prestigious a figure as First Sea Lord Fisher pushed back with any vigor. Indeed, he worsened the larger debacle by urging that the Dardanelles naval operation should include a major maritime offensive to seize the Gallipoli Peninsula and Constantinople (75–82). Though Fisher later claimed to have opposed the naval operation (he intermittently displayed ambivalence during its planning), Parliament’s Dardanelles Commission confirmed that the project had enjoyed the support of Lord Kitchener, while Fisher failed to make his reservations known (276–77). Bell concludes that “if Fisher thought the naval campaign was doomed to fail, he could have stopped it” (363). Haphazard British decision-making in 1915 meant that “even after more than six months of war, the War Council was still providing only the loosest oversight to the empire’s military and naval operations” (136). In the event, a combined-arms offensive in which land forces were deemed indispensable to the success of the naval operations incurred some 390,000 casualties.

The Dardanelles Commission did not altogether restore Churchill’s reputation, but it did begin its rehabilitation to the point that Lloyd George, when he succeeded Asquith as prime minister, pondered bringing him back into cabinet. But anti-Churchill sentiment was running strong among Conservatives, intensified by journalists like H.A. Gwynne of the *Morning Post*. Gwynne fumed in a letter (17 July 1917) to Lady Bathurst, the paper’s owner, that Churchill’s appointment as Minister of Munitions amounted to a disaster “greater I think than has fallen on us during the whole of the war” (287–88). This was a year *after* the Somme offensive. Such was the hatred of Churchill among the political and chattering classes. Violet Asquith, a Churchill confidante, wrote perceptively that:

I was constantly aware of the hostility he seemed to provoke, quite unconsciously and unwittingly. Lord Beaverbrook has written that in the Conservative Party “he was hated, he was mistrusted, and he was feared.” Among certain sections of our own party he was an object of vague suspicion. His successes were grudgingly conceded, while his failures were greeted with exultant Schadenfreude. Why was it, I wondered unceasingly. Most people recognized his genius. Were they jealous of it? Were they afraid of it? Or were they merely offended because they believed him to be insufficiently interested in themselves and their opinions? In this belief they were, incidentally, dead right. He was not interested. Nor did he seek to conceal his indifference by any softening subterfuge. To save his life he could not have pretended to an interest that he did feel, nor would he have thought it

worth doing. He enjoyed the ovation of the crowd but he still ignored the necessity of having a personal following. (183–84)

Bell's page-turner account presents Churchill as a young war leader and politician of such promise that his very presence unsettled many of his colleagues. Churchill certainly enjoyed and assiduously cultivated the adulation of the crowd. Chapter 15, "From Millstone to Myth," details his role in directing "the great movement of opinion" on the Dardanelles operation specifically and the war generally (330–56). So compelling was his perspective that, long after unbiased revisionism had debunked the romantic Churchill myth, Roy Jenkins rated him "the greatest human being ever to occupy 10 Downing Street" and Martin Gilbert cited Clement Attlee's verdict that Churchill was "the greatest Englishman of our time."⁵ Bell notes that in the 1920s the Anglophone world accepted Churchill's charge⁶ that the tragedy on the Western front, especially the Somme offensive, had been "from beginning to end a welter of slaughter" and indicted British army and naval leaders for sins far more mortal than the Dardanelles misadventure. So, too, authoritative commentators like Basil Liddell Hart and J.F.C. Fuller faulted the execution, not the concept, of the campaign and endorsed Churchill's criticism of unimaginative leaders ill-equipped to deal with broad strategic issues (332–33).

During the 1930s, Churchill continued to curry the favor of the British public rather than of his fellow Conservatives, whose criticism was undercut by Hitler's duplicity and Churchill's advocacy of accelerated rearmament. In September 1939, Chamberlain felt compelled to bring him into cabinet at the head of the very Admiralty whence he was banished in 1915. Britain was now a different country. In 1940, Churchill could shed the blame for the Narvik debacle in Norway because the nation, in the fight of its life, craved innovative and aggressive leadership, whatever risks it might entail.

Churchill and the Dardanelles should be compulsory reading for anyone curious about strategic issues uniting the two World Wars or the still controversial career of Winston Churchill.

5. See, respectively, *Churchill: A Biography* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) 912 and *Churchill: A Life* (NY: Henry Holt, 1991) 958.

6. In *The World Crisis*, his multivolume history of the First World War (pub. 1923–31).