

The New Whig Historians

Revisionism and Contemporary Culture

Churchill

The recent election by BBC television viewers (2002) of Sir Winston Churchill as the greatest Briton has prompted a concerted effort to rehabilitate Churchill's reputation. This requires an explanation as it is not clear why Churchill's most recent poll victory should require any such buttressing. The circumstances of the 60th anniversary of VE day have also prompted a reconsideration of the popular history of WW2 in Britain.

In fact, Churchill's status as greatest Briton was based solely on his record during WW2. The inconvenient facts of a long and varied political career, along with his unequivocally aristocratic and elitist class position, were ignored. The presentation of Churchill as the "man of destiny" during WW2, and as removed from the immediate and defining circumstances of his own life, has created an opportunity for revisionists to re-examine the Churchill myth.

My purpose, in these brief notes, is not to question the Churchill myth (a myth that, within the context of WW2, I broadly support) but to examine why the processes of revisionism should begin again now. Furthermore, I wonder what causes, beyond Churchill's own reputation, might be served by any such revision.

Two recent television series (Holmes (2005) BBC and Berthon & Potts (2005) C4) have examined Churchill's role during WW2. Although the contexts of these series are very different they both simplify the Churchill myth by reducing it to a narrative defined by Churchill's role as "man of destiny" (the choice of Churchill to lead a war coalition-cabinet after a period in political exile) and as a "man of the

people” (whose powers of rhetoric and empathy, particularly during the period 1940-41, cemented the class solidarity that became a cornerstone of the British mythologies of WW2 (Calder 1992).

The war cabinet represents a unique moment of sustained political unity in recent British history. The decision by Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin to resume party politics before VE Day, and in anticipation of military victory, has been presented as an example of political duplicity. Revisionists have presented the election defeat of 1945 as a political humiliation for Churchill based, in part at least, on the political betrayal of his former colleagues. The betrayal is used again to excuse Churchill’s misjudged “Gestapo” jibe against a possible Socialist government. This narrative of betrayal and misjudgement draws obviously enough on the history of Imperial Rome.

Of course, the attempt to present Attlee as politically devious is linked to the revisionist’s project to question the moral basis of post-war welfare reform. The popular mandate of Attlee’s government is effectively called into question without reference to the overwhelming democratic evidence of electoral results.

Furthermore, the narrative of betrayal ignores the powerful popular desire, expressed during 1940 and 1941, for a new form of society and a politics of social justice (see for example *Picture Post’s* “Plan for Britain”). The revolutionary potential of the period was expressed through the pages of *Picture Post*, in George Orwell’s polemical journalism and in J B Priestley’s broadcasts.

The revolutionary bona fides of the period are best expressed in the radical proposals of Tom Wintringham for the formation of an armed popular militia. Our contemporary perception of the Home Guard is now based, almost entirely, on the pompous and superannuated characters of the TV sit-com *Dad’s Army*. In

fact, the origins of the LDV forces were as militarily radical as any proposed by Liddell-Hart or Orde Wingate.

The force was conceived as a mobile, resourceful and armed militia able to engage the enemy with tactics of resistance, hit-and-run and the irregular confrontations of locally organised cells. Wintringham's proposals drew on his experiences of fighting in the Spanish Civil war and recognised the powerful radicalising potential of military action. For Wintringham, the politics of military resistance and political revolution were inextricably linked.

The revisionist assessment of Churchill's war career is therefore linked to an ideological project on two fronts:

- 1/ To call into question the ethical basis of Labour's welfare foundation of the post-war consensus in Britain
- 2/ To revise the radical history of the popular experience of WW2 downwards

1960s

Coincidentally, a similar project has emerged in relation to the 1960s. A recently published history of the 1960s (Sandbrook 2005) suggests that, beyond the limits of central London, the popular history of the 1960s is not as radical as has been thought. Indeed, the overwhelming impression of the popular history of the decade is one of creeping consumerism and the development of an undifferentiated suburban value-system.

The declinist thesis is derived from Corelli Barnett's revisionist account of Britain's fall as a world power after WW2. The suggestion is that the social changes of the 1960s, linked as they are to hedonistic lifestyle choices, contributed to an irrevocable shift in the social values that had defined the post-war consensus. The subsequent decline of society, in terms of institutionalised and hierarchical structures, is therefore cast as a consequence of the misjudged

radicalism of the 1960s rather than the divisive economic policies of the Thatcherite 1980s.

The New Right ideologues constantly call into question the radical popular history of Britain during the second half of the 20th century. Their efforts to call into question the radical changes of the 1940s and 1960s are an attempt to smooth out the social transformations of Britain and to re-present the narratives of late 20th century Britain as irredeemably corrupted by Leftist misjudgements.

The preferred trajectory of recent British history is re-plotted as a smooth arc of common-sense economic management and traditional social values. The triumph of market forces is represented, at a global level, by an ideological project that serves the interests of the executive caste.

The New Whig historians are part of an ideological project, acknowledged or not, to dismiss the changes of the last 50 years as based on ethically flawed and practically misjudged policies. The implication is clear, only the rediscovery of a classically configured, elitist and hierarchical, form of community will arrest the slide into social anarchy and economic chaos.

We need to remember that the social transformations of the last 50 years have been hewn from a long experience of injustice, marginalisation and exploitation. The reclaiming of our radical history is a matter of increasing urgency.

Paul Rennie

Folkestone

September 2005

1000 words