

WINSTON S CHURCHILL: WAS BROUGHTY FERRY SPEECH THE LAST STRAW?

By Professor Hugh M Begg

"History will be kind to me for I intend to write it." –Winston Churchill

"Tact is the ability to tell someone to go to hell in such a way that they look forward to the trip." –Winston Churchill

"Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened." –Winston Churchill

"I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter." –Winston Churchill

Introduction

It is now 50 years since Churchill's death and apparently David Cameron has stated that "2015 is a year to remember Winston Churchill's extraordinary life of achievement, to admire and celebrate it anew...". Not all of those historians who remember Churchill either from personal recollection or perusal of his political record in and out of Government or some combination of these, share that benign conclusion. Much depends on the timing and the perspectives of the author.

Thus, for instance David Carradine the editor of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography has recently compared the biography of Churchill contained in the Dictionary which appeared in 1980 and written by Sir Edgar Williams who had seen active service in the Second World War with that of the eminent historian Paul Addison who in 2005 wrote of Churchill as an historical personality. Williams, with his leadership in the War in mind concluded that Churchill was "a legend in his lifetime" while Addison wrote of a man of often unstable judgment who made many enemies. Perhaps both were correct: this was an extraordinary man, multi-faceted and charismatic.

If we turn to the array of biographies on the one hand there is the elegant, erudite work of scholarship by Roy Jenkins (Churchill: a Biography) and on the other the bright, breezy journalism of the bizarre Boris Johnson (The Churchill Factor). On one thing all biographers can agree: Churchill's political life before and, indeed, after the Second World War was something of a "mixed bag". For instance, 2015 is not only five decades distant from Churchill's death it is also the centenary of the appalling blunder of the Gallipoli landings during the Great War for which he must take proportionate blame.

At first sight it comes as something of a surprise that in all of the many hundreds of thousands of words written about, and by, Churchill there is little mention of his 14 year tenure as one of the two MPs for Dundee. As far as his numerous biographers are concerned two examples are sufficient to make the point. Roy Jenkins' monumental work which extends to well nigh 1000 pages devotes less than 10 to Churchill's representation of Dundee in Parliament. In Boris Johnson's journalistic essay there are only 3 mentions of Dundee and the bibliography ignores Tony Paterson's helpful, if incomplete, book on Churchill's time as MP for Dundee (Churchill -A seat for Life).

Turning to Churchill's own almost complete silence on his time in Dundee, the reasons are not all that hard to find. Dundee played little part in his ambitions; his eyes were firmly on national prizes

rather than local service; and he visited the constituency rarely and then only with the single purpose of being re-elected. Nor would he, a man never too far from a whisky and soda, wish to be reminded that he was defeated in 1922 by Neddie Scrymgeour who was standing on a prohibitionist ticket.

The following notes focus on Churchill's time as MP for Dundee, the role played in his downfall in the General Election of 1922 by the D C Thomson Press, and the contribution of some 300 rather genteel ladies gathered together in the St Aidan's Church Hall, Broughty Ferry (now, ironically, occupied by an undertaker) in Churchill's demise in Dundee.

Churchill in 1908

In 1908, Churchill, was still in his mid thirties but with a lifetime of varied experiences including reckless bravery as a soldier /war correspondent, as an amateur but prolific historian, and as turn coat politician (Tory to Liberal). With all that already under his substantial belt, he was promoted in to Minister for the Board of Trade to succeed Lloyd George in the Liberal Government. This was substantial coup for the high spending Churchill since MPs in those days did not draw a salary and, at the time, he was largely dependant on his journalism.

At that time, newly appointed Cabinet Ministers had to seek re-election. Unfortunately for Winston, the mandatory by-election in his Manchester North West constituency became a test of confidence in the Liberal government led by Henry Campbell Bannerman (a former pupil of the High School of Glasgow). Forced to defend the Government's increasingly unpopular policies of the previous two years, branded a traitor to his class by vengeful Conservatives because he had already stalked across the floor of the House of Commons in 1904, and hounded on the hustings by Suffragettes with whose aspirations and tactics he had no sympathy, Churchill lost. Not everyone was sad to see him go: one local newspaper asked: "What use is a WC without a seat".

A Seat for Life

In 1908 Churchill was seen as a young lion of the Liberal Party, a champion of progressive causes, confronting the rigidities of the British establishment, and helping Lloyd George and Asquith to lay the foundations of the modern welfare state. With all that as his background, Winston received a telegram from the Liberals in Dundee inviting him to become their candidate in a by-election called as a consequence of the elevation of the sitting member, Edmund Robertson, to the House of Lords as Baron Lochee. After a little hesitation, Churchill was pleased with his choice and wrote to his mother: "It is a life seat and cheap and easy beyond all experience". In reaching that conclusion he was, no doubt influenced by the fact that Dundee had returned Liberal Members of Parliament for the past 50 years and in 1906 the Liberal "landslide" of 1906 which had seen off the Conservative administration of Arthur Balfour. What Churchill had not foreseen was the role which the Labour movement in its many forms was to play in Dundee in his "seat for life".

Although identified as a "carpetbagger" by opponents, opposed for the first time by Councillor Edward Scrymgeour, hounded by ever more militant suffragettes, and in the face of growing support for Labour inclined candidates nationwide, Churchill was duly elected with 44% of the vote in a turnout of 85% of those qualified. It is worth remembering at this stage that after Churchill had

replaced his then mentor, David Lloyd George, at the Board of Trade he badgered Prime Minister Asquith for labour exchanges, unemployment insurance, health insurance, public works to mop up unemployment, and public ownership of the railways. Sydney and Beatrice Webb, the Fabian Socialists, proclaimed him as the most progressive politician of his time. Little wonder then that, given his political stance in 1908 and despite antagonism from increasingly militant suffragettes and opposition from a nascent Labour party, Winston, the Liberal, could look to a solid basis of support amongst the working folk in the Juteopolis of the day.

The other person elected in this dual constituency was the Labour member Alexander Wilkie. Although he was a leading trade unionist, Wilkie was no socialist-indeed he had stood as a Liberal in Sunderland. In short, his views were not so different from those of Churchill at the time. They formed a working partnership at Westminster based on mutual interest and respect; and they were both re-elected in 1910 against the tide which ran against the Liberals.

Of current interest, in April 1912, Prime Minister Asquith (who, incidentally, represented the East Fife Constituency) introduced an Irish Home Rule Bill which provided for a parliament in Dublin. It was his intention to introduce similar forms of Home Rule for Scotland and Wales thereby linking the four constituents of the United Kingdom in a federal union. In a speech in October 1913 Churchill confirmed his continuing support for Home Rule on the then Liberal model: *"I will run the risk of prophecy and tell you that the day will most certainly come - many of you will live to see it - when a federal system will be established in these Islands which will give Wales and Scotland the control within proper limits of their own Welsh and Scottish affairs."* The Great War put an end to all that.

Seeds of Discontent

As First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill had been forced to shoulder proportionate blame for the disastrous Gallipoli landings and he resigned from the Cabinet. Following his self imposed penance as lieutenant colonel with the 6th Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers serving in the front line (reputedly within 100 yards of Corporal Hitler for a time) and all the while still an MP for Dundee, Churchill returned to the Cabinet in 1917 as Minister for Munitions in the coalition Government led by Lloyd George. This required him to stand for re-election. During the war years the convention was that new Ministers would be unopposed. However, there was simmering opposition. In a straight fight with Neddie Scrymgeour, the pacifist and prohibitionist, of whom more later, Churchill took some 78% of the votes cast.

In the 1918 "khaki" election the franchise was extended to all males over 21 and to women for the first time. In the euphoria of victory Churchill's pre-war dallings with eugenics and his antagonism to the unionists of Ulster in 1913 were overlooked. He was once again elected as an MP for Dundee along with Alexander Wilkie, the Labour Party candidate with whom he had continuing affable arrangements.

The electorate had at first felt rather honoured to be represented by a Cabinet minister and seemed prepared to overlook Churchill's long absences. However, by 1922 things were very different. The seeds of discontent had been sown early even if they had taken some time to come to fruition. From the beginning of his political career Churchill invariably addressed national rather than local issues. From his point of view, Dundee suffered the inconvenience of being some 440 miles from Westminster and only readily accessible by overnight sleeper train from King's Cross. The notion of

“nursing his constituency” was entirely foreign to him, just as it was to the vast majority of his contemporaries.

Furthermore Addison’s acerbic description was ringing true: “Hyperactive and transparently on the make, he was far from the English ideal of the gentleman.” He was increasingly out of touch with the public opinion which had provided him with “a seat for life” some 14 years before.

- In the “juteopolis” of 1922 those with long memories could recall 1910 when Churchill as Home Secretary had reputedly authorised the use of troops, if required, to quell the miners’ riots in Tonypany in South Wales; and this was followed by his rather bumptious presence at the leading role in the so called siege of the anarchists at Sydney Street.
- Then again there was the recollection by the women newly enfranchised in 1918 for his continuing, ill-disguised distaste for the tactics and behaviour of the more militant suffragettes.
- Churchill’s opposition to Irish independence (rather than “Home Rule” on the pre-war Liberal which saw a federal state including a united Ireland) did him few favours in “little Tipperary”: Lochee; and in a city now sickened by the slaughter of “Dundee’s own” in the Great War at Loos and the Antwerp and Gallipoli disasters there was concern about what was seen by some as his bellicose “war mongering” attitude to events in post revolution Russia where he supported intervention in support of the White Russians in their struggle against the Bolsheviks.
- Moreover, the failure, at least publicly, to use his position in Cabinet to intervene in local social issues including unemployment, low pay, and poor housing all ran against him particularly amongst those whose sympathies were now with the Labour Movement and even the embryonic Communist party.

In short, by 1922 Churchill’s reforming zeal of the pre-war years, and the enthusiasm of the electorate for a war time leader had gone. They were replaced by much local bitterness and disillusionment with Churchill’s record both as a member of the central government and as a largely absentee local Member of Parliament. Churchill’s left wing radicalism of 1908 had been transformed into the right wing tendencies which were to characterise the rest of his long and turbulent political life. That was all to count against him in the general election of 1922.

The 1922 Election

The United Kingdom general election of 1922 was held on Wednesday 15 November 1922. The political position was very complicated. The Liberal party were deeply split between Asquith's Liberals and Lloyd George's National Liberals. Until the previous month the Conservatives had been in coalition with the Lloyd George Liberals but that arrangement had collapsed in a welter of acrimonious disagreements.

At that time Dundee was still one of a number of urban constituencies which, because of their size, qualified to send two MPs to Westminster. Each elector in the city had two votes and those who decided to use only one of them-because none of the other candidates was thought worthy of support- were known as “plumpers”.

After some prevarication Churchill confirmed that he would stand as a “Liberal and Free Trader” although there were doubts put about by his opponents that he was, by then, neither a Liberal nor a Free Trader. Indeed, after reflecting on his recent political stance the local Conservatives had what their chairman described as the “disagreeable task” of not standing against him.

In the end there were five other candidates contesting:

- Edwin Scrymgeour, the local Town Councillor, Christian socialist, pacifist, ardent prohibitionist and anti-Marxist who had contested the seat since 1908;
- Ernest Morel who had achieved international acclaim as a modern day Wilberforce by revealing the appalling behaviour of the King Leopold and his acolytes in building a financial empire on the basis of slave labour in the Belgian Congo; a pacifist, and prolific writer he had opposed the British entry into the Great War
- Willie Gallacher who was one of the leading figures of the shop stewards' movement in Glasgow and a founder member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, but repudiated by the local Trades and Labour party in Dundee;
- Churchill's Liberal running mate was D. J. MacDonald, who owned a local engineering company and had a reputation as a benevolent employer; and
- Robert Rivington Pilkington, backed by a number of local businessmen as an Asquith Liberal, was an Irishman who had practiced for 30 years at the Western Australian bar and served in the Commonwealth Parliament in Canberra.

In the run up to polling day the 48 year old Churchill had been laid low with appendicitis. In those days remedial surgery was a dangerous procedure which was far from the routine it is today. The need for recuperation necessarily limited his campaigning and placed heavy, consequent burdens on his wife, Clementine, which she shouldered until his arrival in Dundee on 11th November (Armistice Day) by rail in a private coach.

A review of the campaign reveals that it was hard fought. There were belligerent public meetings with speeches there and elsewhere (when they could be heard) designed to be reported in the local press. There is ample evidence of eloquence, platitudinous self-justification, good humoured and ill-humoured barracking, positive jockeying for position amongst the competing candidates, and what would now be called “negative campaigning”. In that Winston (and, on occasion, his devoted wife Clementine) showed themselves to be willing, and at times thoroughly unpleasant, participants.

Churchill and the D C Thomson Press

In the previous couple of years or so Churchill had become involved in a long running spat with David Couper Thomson the stubborn, autocratic, principled, independently minded, and very influential 68 year old proprietor of the morning newspapers: the Dundee Courier and the Dundee Advertiser. The following extracts from letters from Thomson to Churchill give a flavour of the correspondence:

Thomson to Churchill: 20 March 1922

“.... there have been various emissaries from Coalition sources wanting me to alter our policy and sell myself for coalition gold so as to end our criticism. But I am not for sale”

To understand the contained rage that Thomson felt one has to recall the blatant sale of honours by which the Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George sought to secure not only party funds but also political support. Astonishingly, Lloyd George had told one political rival in 1920 that he regarded the sale of titles as: "... the cleanest way of raising money for a political party". At the time, prices for honours ranged from £10,000 (£310,000 today) for a knighthood to £40,000 (£1.24 million) for a baronetcy.

Thomson to Churchill: 23 May 1922

"...Any fool of a politician can make a public personal attack on newspaper people at any time, but he can't make it a controversy. Nor can he scare newspaper people...To be quite candid, if you wish to discuss anything with me on friendly lines, cut out all this threat nonsense, and let us discuss matters man to man and from the point of view of the welfare of the State. That is the basis of my policy, and a policy founded on that basis is the only policy worth discussing."

The "threat nonsense" was the suggestion by Churchill that he would set up a newspaper to compete with the D C Thomson Press following his attempt to bribe Thomson into submission with offer of a "Lloyd George" honour.

By the eve of polling Churchill must have been well aware that he was on the verge of defeat. He had been on the wrong side of a stormy open meeting the previous evening: *Churchill Howled Down, Pandemonium at Drill Hall Meeting, Police Draw Batons* were the headlines the Dundee Advertiser: *"For half an hour last night in the Drill Hall, Dundee, Mr Churchill strove to get a hearing from an audience numbering anything from 5000 to 6000...but organised opposition...was so noisy that the meeting broke up abruptly at twenty minutes to nine with Mr Churchill's speech undelivered."* That night his private detective, Sergeant Thomson, slept across the door to Winston's bedroom.

The Broughty Ferry Speech

Angry, and probably in considerable discomfort from his recent operation for appendicitis, in the quieter atmosphere of St Aidan's Church Hall the following afternoon before some 300 genteel, newly enfranchised ladies Churchill tore into the D C Thomson Press.

A part of the verbatim account which appeared in the following day's papers ran as follows: *"You have a Liberal and Conservative newspaper owned by the same man and produced from the same office on the same day. Here is one man, Mr Thomson, selling Liberal opinions with his left hand and Conservative opinions with his right hand....That is an extraordinary spectacle....If such conduct were developed in private life or by politicians in public life every man and woman in the country would say" That is very double-faced. You cannot believe the two"*

It was clearly impossible for Churchill to grasp that a newspaper proprietor might feel able, indeed have the right, to place a spectrum of opinion before the voters by way of his editors: John Mitchell of the Liberal leaning Courier and Alexander Urquhart of the Conservative leaning Advertiser.

Next morning Churchill must have been astonished to wake up in the Royal Hotel opposite the city churches to read his speech at St Aidan's recorded word for word in the Dundee Courier and

discomfited to find the details of his recent acrimonious correspondence with D C Thomson set out in full.

The Election Outcome

The outcome of the 1922 General Election was a victory for Andrew Bonar Law's Conservatives (Like the Liberal Campbell Bannerman he was a former Pupil of the High School of Glasgow). As a consequence of their internal bickering the Liberals, to which Churchill was at least nominally affiliated, were consigned to a prolonged period of near extinction. In short, even without a Conservative standing against him, Churchill as a Liberal and Free Trader had been swimming against the national tide.

In Dundee, after 6 elections where he came top of the poll, Churchill was placed 4th in the 6-way contest. The results were as follows:

Edwin Scrymgeour: 32,578

E D Morel (Labour): 30,292

D J Macdonald (Liberal): 22,244

W S Churchill (Liberal and Free Trader): 20,466

R R Pilkington (Asquith Liberal): 6,681

William Gallacher (Communist): 5,906

The local man the persistent, pacifist, prohibitionist, Neddie Scrymgeour had come top of the poll at his sixth attempt to become a Member of Parliament. It was said that his local support was so great that the hard-drinking voters of Dundee by then disliked Churchill so much that they trooped out of their public houses to vote for a man who supported the abolition of alcohol. Scrymgeour and the pacifist Morel had clearly benefitted from the growing support from trade unionists and others for the Labour movement in Dundee.

The Marriage of Convenience and the Role of Broughty Ferry in the Subsequent Divorce

Of the 6 candidates in the 1922 election Macdonald and Pilkington did not feature again on the national political scene. The others were more ambitious -and successful.

(1) Willie Gallacher, after numerous attempts elsewhere, was elected to represent West Fife as a Communist in 1935, a seat which he held until 1950.

(2) Edward Morel was bitterly disappointed not to be appointed as Foreign Secretary in Ramsay MacDonald's government in 1924. As a small recompense MacDonald, along with 120 Labour MPs, nominated him (unsuccessfully) for the Nobel peace Prize. Shortly after that he suffered a fatal heart attack at the age of 51.

(3) Neddie Scrymgeour remained an M.P. for Dundee until the 1931 general election. Although he never accepted the invitation to join the Parliamentary Labour Party, his electoral strength was that he belonged to the Labour movement. Tom Johnston, who later was to become arguably Scotland's greatest Secretary of State in Churchill's war time cabinet, won election in December 1924 to the Dundee seat vacated by Morel's death and worked in amicable tandem with Scrymgeour from 1924 until 1929.

As for Churchill, the detail of his subsequent long and turbulent career is well known and there is no need to rehearse even the outline here. Sufficient to say that, without his leadership, vision and courage it is likely that our United Kingdom would be a client state of the German Reich with all of the beastly consequences that would have brought with it.

Both Churchill and Dundee's local politicians had long memories. In 1943 at the height of his war time powers Winston was offered the Freedom of the City by its Councillors albeit by a majority of one with the Council divided along party lines: Labour against and Progressive Conservatives for. Ten days later the Council received its reply: *"Mr Churchill regrets he is unable to accept the honour which you have proposed to confer on him."*

Conclusion

So what are we to make of Churchill's speech at St Aidan's church hall and its role in the loss of his "seat for life"? By 1922 the "carpetbagger" of 1908 was now carrying so much political baggage that in retrospect his defeat by Neddie Scrymgeour and Edwin Morel now seems almost inevitable. The speech which Churchill made in the hall to an assembled group of around 300 newly enfranchised, genteel ladies from the Ferry was only the final nail in the self-constructed coffin for his undoubted aspiration to continue as one of the MPs for Dundee.

In a review of Tony Paterson's helpful, though not comprehensive, book on Churchill's time as MP for Dundee the late Donald Dewar reached the following perceptive conclusion: *"Perhaps Churchill never really cared for Dundee. There are references to hardship and poverty but he did nothing for the mill workers, there was no gut feeling of commitment behind his rhetoric. Churchill served Dundee for 14 years. He left the town immediately after his defeat and never set foot in it again. It suggests a marriage of convenience rather than a love affair."* (Glasgow Herald 4 October, 1980)

Postscript

Writing on the 50th anniversary of Churchill's funeral in 1965 the modern day pundit Jeremy Paxman had this to say: "Any rounded assessment of Winston Churchill's life has to acknowledge that he was a ruthless egoist, a chancer, and a charlatan at times. Would he be electable now? I fear not. He was a man of his time, a parliamentary one-off who'd be suffocated by the spinning and posturing that pass for politics today" This to take nothing away from Churchill as our indomitable leader in the War against Nazi Germany which threatened the very existence of Great Britain. "Came the hour, came the man. Let the record speak for itself."

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1. 10. 2015