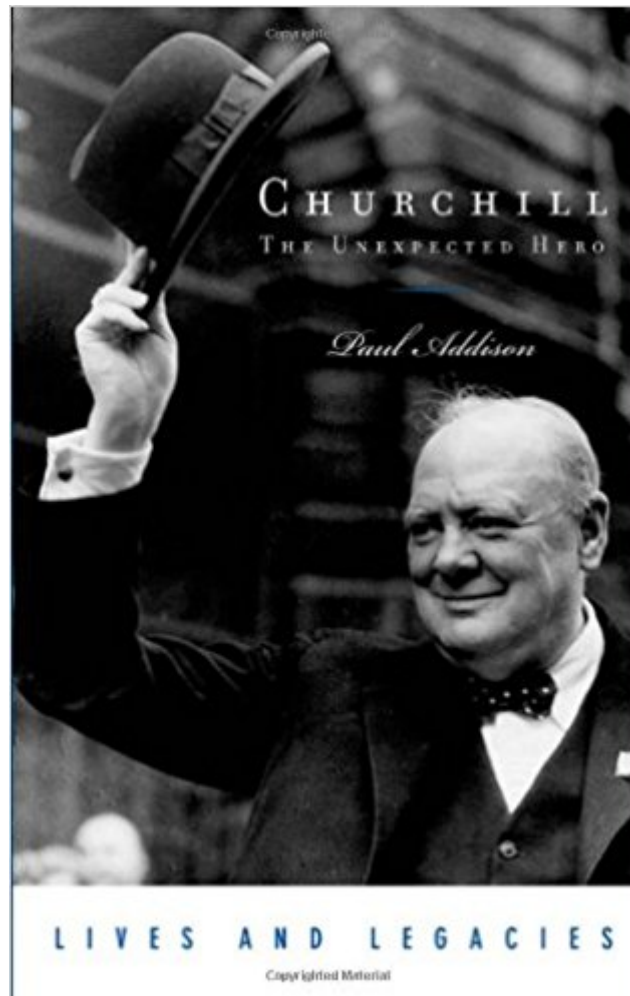




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Churchill: The Unexpected Hero



Synopsis

Churchill was the only British politician of the twentieth century to become an enduring national hero. His unique image, complete with V-sign, giant cigar, and outlandish costumes, was as universally famous as Charlie Chaplin's tramp. Now, in *Churchill, The Unexpected Hero*, Paul Addison offers a major reassessment of this highly charismatic figure, focusing largely on the life-long battle over Churchill's reputation. "Churchill's career," notes Addison, "was one of snakes and ladders." The longest of the "snakes" was Gallipoli, the ill-starred military campaign that all but destroyed his career in 1915. After Gallipoli, Churchill's reputation plummeted, and he was attacked as a shameless egotist, an opportunist without principles or convictions, an unreliable colleague, an erratic policy-maker who lacked judgement, and a reckless amateur strategist with a dangerous passion for war and bloodshed. Indeed, throughout his career, at one time or another, Churchill offended every party and faction in the land. Yet all but the most hostile also conceded that he possessed great abilities, remarkable eloquence, and a streak of genius, and with the coming of World War II, the man long excluded from high office--on the grounds that he was a danger to King and Country--became the savior of that country, a truly great war leader. As Churchill's reputation skyrocketed, Addison shows how his heroic self-image was communicated to the world through a stupendous public relations campaign in which oratory, journalism, and history were all pressed into service. Churchill won two great victories in World War II. The first was a victory over Nazi Germany. The second, a victory over the legion of skeptics who derided his judgement and denied his claims to greatness.

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Customer Reviews

To distinguish his Churchill biography from the many others, historian Addison focuses on Churchill's critics. Whether contemporaries or historians, they are numerous and caustic, calling Churchill an opportunist and a warmonger. Against that stands Churchill's leadership in World War II, which inescapably shadows his prior record in British politics. To his account of the pre-WWII career, Addison appends telling insights on Churchill's character traits, prime among them a profoundly juvenile egotism. Brilliantly intuitive though he was, Churchill, impatient and impulsive, took little account of others' feelings; hence, his acquisition of political enemies over time. Narrating the indictments they leveled at him (twice switching parties, the Dardanelles disaster of WWI), Addison paradoxically humanizes Churchill, for he is a far more iconic figure for Americans than for the British. Nevertheless, Addison makes the case for why Churchill should be iconic, disputing a revisionist school that negatively deconstructs Churchill's actions in WWII. Astute in its interpretations, Addison's work makes for swift reading and is a practical alternative to the monuments by William Manchester and Martin Gilbert. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

'This is a highly readable short biography of a hero with feet of clay.' Lloyd's List 'elegant' Observer 'excellent new book' 'short but masterly book' Mail on Sunday 'gloriously readable style and lightly-worn scholarship' Scotsman 'Paul Addison's Churchill: The Unexpected Hero is the best short book on Britain's wartime PM' Daily Express 'Paul Addison's biography, can stand with Geoffrey Best's highly acclaimed 2001 life.' TLS 'his impressive and expert use of quotation allows far more nuance and counter-argument than is normal in a text of only 250 pages covering ninety years of a crowded life.' TLS

Winston Churchill is one of my favorite characters in modern history. Similar to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, he was a man who despite his many shortcomings, showed up at just the right time in history. I have read a number of biographies of Churchill, and found this to be one of the better ones.=== The Good Stuff ===* Paul Addison creates a reasonably balanced portrait of Churchill. He was a man of many talents, and at least a fair share of foibles. And while some biographers seem to think it their task to tear down the subject, Addison keeps to an even keel.* We see some of the darker side of Churchill. He was a man of ambition, probably a borderline alcoholic,

and capable of switching loyalties and promoting half-baked schemes. We see some of his racist tendencies, although to be fair these were well within the realm of respectable opinions in the 1920's. We also get a glimpse of Churchill taking a hard line against striking workers, a stance for which labor leaders never forgave him.* Addison's writing style is easy to read, although he is prone to long paragraphs, something that seems to bother me more on a Kindle than in print.* There were at least a few viewpoints and opinions which were new to me. Churchill evidently harbored some blame of the United States for the rise of German dictatorships. His logic was that the US forced Britain to repay their WWI debts. Britain had no choice but to force Germany to make their reparations ordered under the WWI peace treaty, which forced Germany into a deeper depression. This paved the way for Hitler's rise to power. A bit of a stretch in my opinion, but an interesting hypothesis.* Most of us think of Churchill as a skilled forecaster of world political events. But this book highlights some of his miscues, several of which are fascinating. For example, in 1925, we find Churchill unwilling to invest in the defenses of Singapore, because he does not believe the Japanese to be a threat to seek territorial expansion. Oops.=== The Not-So-Good Stuff ===* Addison gives me more credit for understanding the British system of government and politics than is justified. Some of the narrative was a little hard to follow, simply because I didn't understand the nuances and details of Churchill's maneuvering.* Churchill was capable, at least in my opinion, of saying things in public that he really did not mean. His motive may have been to confuse his enemies, pursue some longer term agenda, or to maneuver opponents into an untenable position. In any case, Addison doesn't always give the reader the context to separate Churchill's postures from his actual opinions and beliefs.* I would have preferred less pages spent on Churchill's political dealings in the 1930's, and more pages spent on the war years. As it was, the war years seemed to be about 15% of the total narrative, far too little in my opinion.=== Summary ===I enjoyed the book, and would recommend it to any Churchill or history fan. The book was a bit of a slow read, and took a couple days to get through. But it was full of interesting and at least for me, new information. I would have liked better explanations of the British politics described, and more details of the war years.

Informative but the writing fails to flow or excite. For anyone not from Britain and that period, the book provides a long and confusing laundry list of names - a simple reference table to sort out persons, dates, and affiliations would be most helpful. There are lots of citations and quotes to support manuscript, but not much about his personality other than his public persona. Some background about his family history and his own parents is provided, but virtually nothing about

Churchill as a father and parent, nor what his personal friends thought of him. Overall, a story of a complex person; a product of his age and upbringing, who followed his own path. Also, for those enough who are old enough to remember Churchill, we only have the image of him in his senior years. Given that he was active and apparently reasonably fit as a young man, it would have been useful to include some images of the younger Churchill. I learned enough from this biography to make it useful, but it never fully engaged my attention due to the writing style.

Short lives of Winston Churchill abound, including volumes by well known popular historians such as John Keegan and Paul Johnson. Paul Addison's volume for Oxford Press's Lives and Legacies series, however, is well deserving of its status as the connoisseur's choice for an introduction to Churchill. Addison succeeds because he does more than summarize Churchill's life. He frames the essential question regarding Churchill in the right way, and the story therefore becomes much more interesting as a result. The subtitle of the book "The Unexpected Hero" summarizes his thesis nicely. Churchill's career until the 1930s was a checkered one, and virtually no one would have expected him to become the towering figure of the 20th century at that point. How Churchill went from being nearly spent as a political force in the 1930s is therefore the story Addison seeks to tell in 254 pages. The Unexpected Hero manages to touch every significant aspect of Churchill's life and career (as well as can be done in under 300 pages), but more importantly Addison is present throughout as a sure footed guide. His judgments on Churchill's actions are sound and serve the reader well, which is important because many of them are the subjects of entire books in and of themselves. Addison's scholarly and sober judgment leaves the reader feeling that he has been told the salient facts by an expert without an axe to grind. Addison also nicely summarizes the state of play when it comes to contemporary disputes among historians on Churchill's legacy, and sums up barrels of ink nicely in his post script. Because of this, Addison's volume is not only a strong candidate for the best place to start with Churchill, but also a nice sounding board for those who have read so much Churchill they feel they have begun to lose their bearings as well. Highly recommended.

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