



## Churchill

A Biography

by Roy Jenkins  
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1,001 pages

### Focus

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### Ideas & Trends

### Take-Aways

- Churchill came from English nobility, but his family's reputation was mixed at best.
- His mother is said to have carried out numerous affairs.
- Both his mother and father were emotionally distant from him, although he loved them.
- Churchill loved danger, and was a life-long polo addict.
- He was considered a loving and enthusiastic father, but he set unrealistically high goals for his children.
- Churchill never understood why Hitler hated people simply because they had been born Jewish.
- Churchill loved to address military problems, but was no warmonger.
- Churchill considered using chemical weapons against the Germans in retaliation against V-2 rocket attacks, but his advisors talked him out of it.
- Churchill's sense of victory at the end of WWII was subdued by his fears of Communist oppression falling across Eastern Europe.
- At times Churchill was frustrated by his role as "junior partner" with Stalin and Roosevelt.

### Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>

## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn about the life of Winston Churchill, including why he is considered the twentieth century's finest British prime minister.

### Recommendation

Perhaps the greatest tribute to the work of author Roy Jenkins is that, at times, he seemed to know what Winston Churchill was actually thinking — and you're pretty sure he's right. When the mind you're reading about belongs to perhaps the greatest Prime Minister in the history of Great Britain, Nobel-prize winner Winston Churchill, that is a pretty impressive accomplishment. Jenkins' biography is essentially unsentimental, and reveals Churchill's idiosyncrasies and errors in an honest manner that serves only to elevate, rather than tarnish, the legacy of the man who rallied the free world to resist the tyranny of National Socialism. Jenkins has written an extraordinary volume which *getAbstract.com* highly recommends to any student of history.

## Abstract

### The Green Years: 1874-1908

Churchill's early life appears to be set among England's landed gentry, but really that is not the case. In certain ways, his blue blood heritage was attenuated, if not tainted. His family heritage was not held in very high regard, noted neither for its public service nor its affluence. The family's founder was a swashbuckling fellow named John Churchill, who was victorious in the battles of Ramillies, Blenheim and Malplaquet in the 18th century. As a result, he received a mansion and other rewards. John Churchill had a reputation for single-minded advancement and self-promotion, however, as the mansion's name, Blenheim Palace, and its showy architecture might suggest.

Those who followed John's legacy did little to distinguish themselves. The most respectable was Winston's grandfather, who served as a member of parliament for 10 years and was the "Lord Lieutenant" of Ireland for the last four years of the second Disraeli government. Winston Churchill, himself, was never actually a landowner, with the exception of the 300 acres surrounding Chartwell, the house only 24 miles from London that he purchased in 1922 and very nearly lost on several occasions, his financial ruin averted only by the charity of friends. Indeed, he later only occupied the land and did not own it. Yet, Churchill, a complex and idiosyncratic person, would never allow himself to be defined by the circumstances of his birth, whatever they might be. His impact on history testifies to that.

Churchill was born on November 30, 1874, two months premature. His father, Lord Randolph, was known as a man in a frenzy of impatience. He met Churchill's mother, Miss Jennie Jerome, an American, at a regatta party in August of 1873. They became engaged just three days later. The Jerome family was thought to be a suitable match because patriarch Leonard Jerome was a New York financier. Although Winston Churchill later described Jerome as the founder of *The New York Times*, this is inaccurate. Actually, Jerome was better known for his horse racing endeavors.

Negotiations ensued over Jennie's dowry, and a settlement was determined: Jerome would provide the couple with the modern-day equivalent of 2.5 million pounds, with

"Churchill was far too many faceted, idiosyncratic and unpredictable a character to allow himself to be imprisoned by the circumstances of his birth."

"His devotion to his career and his conviction that he was a man of destiny were far stronger than any class or tribal loyalty."

“Winston Churchill’s non-relationship with his father was even more wistful than was his semi-relationship with his mother.”

“He was never, either in the way he passed his time or in the assumptions of his thought, a remotely typical junior cavalry officer.”

“His love of danger gave him a recklessness which was personally admirable but would not, at this stage of his life, have made him a confidence-giving commander of more than a handful of men.”

“For the British public the trauma of June 1940 was the collapse of France.”

half of the equity, and half of the ensuing interest income, going to each member of the couple. Randolph’s father contributed another sum, therefore making the couple’s income the modern equivalent of 150,000 pounds a year. The couple would tend to live above their income and would constantly be in debt. Jennie Jerome had passed most of her adolescent years in Paris, but apparently preferred New York. She had a reputation for extraordinary beauty, and gradually became hard and self-indulgent. Churchill was the first son of the marriage, and there is a strong suspicion that Randolph did not father the second son. Jennie later claimed to have rejected the advances of Sir Charles Dilke, although Lord Randolph attempted to pummel Dilke on one occasion.

Winston Churchill expressed feelings of affection toward his mother, frequently calling her “my darling Mummy” in his letters. Evidently, however, she was often a distant presence in his life, and his father was even more so. His father was too busy with his political career to devote much time to parenthood. To put the relationship in perspective, Winston once had a long, alcoholic dinner with his own son. After dinner, he remarked to his boy: “We have this evening had a longer period of continuous conversation together than the total which I ever had with my father in the whole course of his life.”

Such was the dubious provenance of Winston Churchill. It was not a cosseted childhood, and his first school was renowned for its brutal strictness. His second school was notable for a tradition that lacked academic discipline. The third was Harrow, where Churchill proved to be adept at neither classics nor mathematics. He did evidence an affinity for historical narrative and the English language. When Churchill recited the 1,200 lines of Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* without error, English master Robert Somerville noted his achievement.

After graduation from Harrow, Churchill wanted to attend the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. After he failed the exams for admittance a second time, his parents sent him to a school designed to help students cram to pass the test. His preparation was delayed several months, however, by a serious accident. Trying to avoid capture during a game in Dorset, he jumped 30 feet from a bridge. The impact ruptured his kidney. After his recovery, he rejoined the Prep class and eventually won a cavalry cadetship. He entered the Royal Military Academy in September 1893, and managed to graduate 15 months later, in December, 1894, as the eighth-ranked student out of 150. About one month later, his father passed away. A month after that, Churchill became a second lieutenant in the Fourth Hussars, earning a little more than 150 pounds a year. This was not enough to cover his expenses, so Churchill relied on his mother, who even at age 40 was still known for her beauty.

### The Young Warrior

Finances were an issue for Churchill in his early days in the British military, and during this time he evolved two firm rules that he followed throughout his life. The first rule was that expenditures should be determined by needs, that is, that you should spend whatever you felt you needed to spend. The second rule was that, when — due to the observation of the first rule — one’s financial position began to slip, the deficit should be overcome by increasing income rather than by cutting expenses. To modern commoners this may indeed sound like a good plan for fiscal disaster and, indeed, Churchill had his share of financial close calls.

Churchill used all his mother’s connections to get closer to military action, so he could send correspondence from the front to newspaper editors, thereby earning an extra 15 to 20 pounds per “letter,” as the articles were called. He spent his 21st birthday under fire in

“The Battle of Britain, although at least as decisive in its consequences as Blenheim or Waterloo, was a much less precise event.”

“A draw was all that Britain needed, in combination with German naval weakness, to stave off invasion, for the first time since 1066, across the narrow seas. It was therefore one of the most decisive draws in history.”

“It was therefore a moment of unalloyed joy when he heard the news of Pearl Harbor.”

“Churchill was an instinctive and somewhat romantic monarchist.”

Cuba, where the Hussars were fighting local rebels in alliance with Spain, and seemed to find it a wholly satisfactory experience. He served in several notable military campaigns with distinction. His participation in the fight against rebels along the Swat Valley near the Afghanistan border of India led to his first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*. At the time, he also began working on his only work of fiction, *Savrola*. Lady Randolph got the Malakand book published, and it received favorable reviews.

Upon his retirement from the military Churchill immediately dived into politics, launching his career by dining with influential figures. When he was just 24, he began his stellar political career as a Conservative candidate for the House of Commons.

### Statesman-Hero

Before he knew much about Hitler, Churchill admired the German’s sense of patriotism. Churchill was truly perplexed by Hitler’s anti-Semitism, however. Why, he asked, would you hate people by virtue of their birth, a matter over which they had no control?

Indeed, Churchill was one of the very first statesmen to recognize that Hitler represented an unrivaled menace. As early as 1933, he denounced the “odious conditions” developing in Germany and began regularly criticizing Britain’s lack of military preparedness. Through a series of political setbacks as the Second World War approached, Churchill found himself in a position where only war would be sufficient to vault him into real ministerial power. His relationship with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was strained at best. Chamberlain held out that Germany could be a productive partner in peace. Churchill disagreed and, as the threat from Hitler increased, Churchill’s political star rose.

About a dozen hours after Hitler began his invasion of Poland, on Friday, September 1, 1939, Chamberlain summoned Churchill to a meeting. Chamberlain desperately needed Churchill’s involvement in the government. He offered Churchill a seat in the War Cabinet and the Admiralty, and Churchill accepted. Essentially, Chamberlain had been forced to admit that Churchill’s warnings about Hitler had been valid. Churchill, with his fiery oratory and military background, was soon giving speeches on the progress of the war effort.

When Chamberlain’s government fell, Churchill was well positioned to step into office. Many of his opponents thought his government would be short-lived. It could easily have fallen in May 1940, when Churchill suddenly had to evacuate more than 300,000 British and French troops from Dunkirk, France, and its adjacent beaches. As German tanks rolled forward, the evacuation had to happen between May 27 and June 1. Only a few days before, he thought that, realistically, it might only be possible to save 50,000 of them. A huge debacle threatened. Britain would be vulnerable to even a half-hearted invasion if it lost so many soldiers and the country would suffer a severe psychological blow.

Against all odds, an armada of small boats bobbed across the still Channel, successfully rescuing 335,000 troops. The House of Commons was so ebullient following the news that they treated Dunkirk as a military victory. But, as Churchill reminded them testily, “Wars are not won by evacuations.”

The Battle of Britain began in the summer of 1940 with aerial attacks and bombing runs. Soon the European war turned into a world war. Churchill began avidly courting the Americans. In February 1941, he broadcast the plea, “Give us the tools and we will finish the job.” In reality, he hoped that the proper weaponry and assistance would enable Britain to hold out until help could arrive.

When Churchill learned about the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, he remarked, “So we have won after all.” He understood that the entrance of Russia and

“His cautiously hostile appraisal of Eisenhower was striking.”

“When I started writing this book, I thought that Gladstone was, by a narrow margin, the greater man, certainly the more remarkable specimen of humanity.”

the United States into the war vastly improved Britain’s chances. After Pearl Harbor, Churchill never doubted the eventual outcome of the war, despite its ups and downs. History proved his assessment correct. While certainly grieved to receive word of the severe American naval losses in Hawaii, he understood that from that time forward, he had an ally who was irreversibly committed to winning the war.

Churchill and Roosevelt never agreed on the significance of the Japanese threat to India and Egypt. Churchill was concerned that Japan and Germany could unite in a southern arc. The British felt that, naval engagements aside, the Americans focused almost totally on Germany while the British kept trying to remind them that they were also at war against Japan. Churchill also found himself often frustrated by his role as “junior partner” in the alliance with the formidable Stalin and Roosevelt.

### The Sun Also Sets

Perhaps it is surprising to learn that Churchill did not feel a joyful sense of victory following D-Day and the eventual collapse of the Nazi regime. Ever the strategist, Churchill foresaw the pall of Communist oppression that was about to fall over Eastern Europe. He was also concerned about the looming threat of nuclear weaponry. Churchill could do little about these developments, however, and a larger debacle was awaiting him personally.

In July of 1945, in one of the most devastating defeats his party ever suffered, Churchill went down to electoral defeat. He had underestimated the political forces moving against him and was humbled, if only temporarily.

Churchill continued to be active in political life, however, and despite personal financial difficulties published some of his greatest literary masterpieces, including *The History of English-Speaking Peoples* and *The Gathering Storm*, the first volume of his war memoirs. The great warrior and statesman made a political comeback, and even added the Nobel Prize for Literature to his list of accomplishments. Churchill was also named an honorary citizen of the United States, the first person since Lafayette to receive that honor. Unfortunately, having already suffered a series of strokes, he was in no condition to attend his installation. He was stricken again on January 12, 1965, at age 90, and died twelve days later, his wondrous journey ended. His coffin lay in state at Westminster for three days — the first non-royal to receive that honor since Gladstone in 1898. History contends that Gladstone was the nineteenth century’s greatest prime minister, and Churchill was clearly the greatest of the twentieth century.

## About The Author

Roy Jenkins was active in British politics for more than 50 years. He joined the House of Commons in 1948, and has served as Minister of Aviation, Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer, as well as Chancellor of Oxford University. He assumed a seat in the House of Lords in 1987. The author of *Gladstone* (1997) and 17 other books, he served as president of the Royal Society of Literature, and lived with his wife in London.

## Buzz-Words

Hussars / National Socialism / Royal Military Academy