

Sneers about his self-indulgence and drinking are mere priggishness. He was certainly a bon viveur - 'my tastes are simple; I am easily satisfied with the best' - and his consumption of alcohol would certainly cause palpitations among today's puritan health zealots. But he had the constitution of an ox and was still able to be prime minister at the age of 80.

Some of the prejudice against Churchill was mere snobbery, based on the fact that, though born into the aristocracy as the nephew of the Duke of Marlborough, he had no inherited wealth himself so had to earn his living. This condescension was compounded by his beautiful mother Jennie's US nationality. To the cowardly, appeasing Tory Rab Butler, Churchill was 'the greatest political adventurer of modern times, a half-breed American'.

Churchill could certainly be moody, capricious, egotistical and demanding. In fact, when he was under intense pressure at the height of the invasion scare in 1940, his wife Clemmie warned that he risked becoming 'generally disliked' by his staff because of his 'rough, sarcastic and overbearing manner'. But in general, Churchill was generous, warm, affectionate and loyal. That sense of deep fidelity extended to his Clemmie, a Liberal aristocrat whom he married in 1908 and to whom he remained utterly faithful. Despite all the controversies of his life, there was never a whiff of scandal about his marriage, though not every aspect of their life together was happy.

One child, Marigold, died during her infancy, while their only son Randolph caused them deep misery by his unpleasantness and alcoholism. 'A typical triumph of modern science to find the only part of Randolph that was not malignant and remove it,' said the novelist Evelyn Waugh on hearing that Randolph had undergone a successful operation to remove a benign tumour.

Randolph was a shadow of his great father. The loyalty that Winston showed to Clementine was an extension of the ingrained, ferocious loyalty that he had to his own country. That was how he saved Britain in 1940 and why, 50 years after his death, we still owe him such a debt. ■

◆ *Leo McKinstry is writing a book about Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee. His latest book is Operation Sealion (John Murray, £25).*

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HOW CHURCHILL CHANGED MY LIFE



Through the Churchill Fellowships, the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust 'funds British citizens, resident in the UK, to travel overseas to study areas of topical and personal interest, to gain knowledge and bring back best practice for the benefit of others, their profession and community, in the UK.'

JOHN ROBINSON, one of the inaugural fellows, tells his story.

I am a man of Coventry - and if you lived in Coventry when I was a young man, you were destined to become an engineer. Engineering was in the very DNA of the city and its people. The Luftwaffe had attempted to destroy the city during the Second World War, but Coventry remained the place that made everything.

In 1966, when the inaugural Churchill Fellowships were announced, I was an energetic 35-year-old, working for Coventry Gauge and Tool Ltd. I had served my apprenticeship at the great Alfred Herbert Ltd - a company so big, so strong that you'd have expected the Bank of England to go bust first - but had moved to the smaller firm because it was so progressive. It manufactured for the admiralty precision gun-firing control apparatus and machine tools of high quality and capability.

But I was always hungry for knowledge, so I decided to apply for a fellowship myself, under the 'worker in engineering' category. The United States was light years ahead of the rest of the world in those days, and I wanted to see how they were doing it. My proposed task, if I remember correctly, was to be a 'study of advanced forms of automatic process control, including the numerical control of machine tools'.

More than 3,000 applied for a fellowship and only 66 were awarded. Fortunately, I received one of them.

Fulfilling my plan was an intimidating task. I aimed to visit 80 companies across the US and Canada in six months and it took me ages simply to contact everyone and draw up an itinerary. But the name Churchill opened so many doors and with the help of a Greyhound bus ticket, which cost \$99 for 99 days, I set off on my engineering odyssey.

The grant, which covers travel and living expenses, was certainly very generous. They gave me £5,000 - by comparison a new Mini motorcar only cost about £500 back then - but I got so much out of it. In fact, it totally changed my life. I started in Detroit, finished in New York and sailed home on the Empress of Canada, largely because I'd collected enough information to fill a tea chest.

Back in Britain, the name continued to open doors. Soon, I was offered a managing directorship of a company within the Reed Paper Group, later Reed International, and quickly was earmarked for the main board. I was still in my 30s. As far as I was concerned, a Churchill Fellowship was worth more than a knighthood.

Of course, life doesn't always take the smoothest course and out of the blue I suddenly suffered a viral myocarditis (an infection of the heart). Many with the condition last only 48 hours and I know of only one other person who has survived one. It put me out of action for two years and when I returned to Reed, there had been changes at the top. I was suddenly out of the loop.

I'd missed my opportunity to become Chairman of Reed International, but I went on to have a successful career and, at the age 84, I'm eagerly still working. All these years on, I continue to believe that I have Mr Churchill to thank for that.

◆ www.wcmt.org.uk