

FIRST PRIZE ESSAY: 2022 CHURCHILL ESSAY CONTEST

**HOW WOMEN OF DIFFERENT POLITICAL CONVICTIONS
RESPONDED TO WINSTON CHURCHILL'S
WARTIME LEADERSHIP.**

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History has been kind to the memory of Winston Churchill, and we in 2021 often look back at his leadership during the war years with a certain degree of hero worship. The view of Britain and her Dominions united behind their fearless and beloved leader Winston Churchill, is the stuff of Hollywood movies. The terms *Their Finest Hour*, *We Shall Fight on the Beaches*, and *Victory at All Costs*, have become ingrained in modern phraseology and help to bolster this view. With approval ratings a modern day politician could only dream of, it is no wonder that this view is so prevalent today. But does our modern view of Winston Churchill and his role as Prime Minister from 1940 to 1945 match the reality for women of the day? And if it does, why did his Conservative Party lose the general election in 1945? While we often look back at the war years and Churchill's leadership through rose coloured glasses, the Mass Observation archive provides a contemporary account of those years. A deep dive into the Mass Observation archive allows a glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of six different women as they lived through those historic times.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Already in his golden years when he became Prime Minister in 1940, Winston Churchill had had a lifetime of unique experiences that would shape his leadership. With a military career that began in Queen Victoria's army, Winston saw action in the far reaches of the vast British Empire. Winston next found conflict in South Africa where he became a prisoner of war for a short time, before escaping to safety by way of a plan that was equal parts strategy and luck. With his sights fixed on a political career, it was during his time in India that Winston took steps to make up for his lack of university education by embarking on a self-directed course of studies.¹ An accomplished writer, Winston also managed to get himself on the payroll of some news outfits and supplemented his income as a war correspondent.²

¹ Addison, *ODNB*, p. 4

² Addison, *ODNB*, p. 5

With his military and journalistic exploits over for the time being, Winston set himself to work in politics. Initially a member of the Conservative Party, Winston crossed the floor in 1904 and joined the Liberal Party. While many accused Winston of being an opportunist looking out for number one, Winston countered by saying that he was following his conscience while the Conservative Party were abandoning their principles.³ Following his conscience would become a theme for Winston over the course of his political career. With strong beliefs of his own, and no qualms about upsetting the status quo, Winston could not always be relied upon to tow the party line. Something of a radical, during his early career in Parliament he championed progressive social policies such as compulsory minimum wages, unemployment insurance, and welfare reforms.⁴ Never content to sit still, as First Lord of the Admiralty during the early part of the Great War and Commander of an infantry brigade later in the war, Winston's active leadership gave him hands-on experience of modern warfare. He also had hands-on experience in epic failure, and is still blamed, rightly or wrongly, for the disaster at the Dardanelles. Over the course of his political career Winston "held every major government office, with the exception (ironically, given his tremendous influence in foreign affairs) of Foreign Secretary. This experience gave him an unparalleled grasp of the workings of Britain's civil and military machinery."⁵

Prime Minister since May 1937, Neville Chamberlain held the support of the majority of his Conservative Party. With the futility and horror of the Great War still fresh in the minds of most Britons, the government's policy of appeasing Hitler was a popular one. Winston understood what many others did not want to acknowledge – Germany was a rising threat. In an interview with *The New Statesman* in early 1939, Winston was asked to respond to the idea that critics within the government (of which he was one) "foul their own nest" – he answered by saying "Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfils the same function as pain in the human body; it calls attention to the development of an unhealthy state of things. If it is heeded in time, danger may be averted; if it is suppressed, a fatal

³ Addison, *ODNB*, p. 7

⁴ Addison, *ODNB*, p. 9

⁵ G. Rubin, *Forty Ways to Look at Winston Churchill* (New York, 2004), p. 13.

distemper may develop.”⁶ When it became clear that Hitler was not a man of his word, and no amount of placation would stop him from running roughshod over Europe, public sentiment changed. The overwhelming feeling was that a new war, only a generation after the *War to End All Wars*, was inevitable. Because he had been so vocal in his push to increase Britain’s preparedness for war, and because he had seen through Nazi Germany’s thinly veiled territorial expansionism, what initially felt like warmongering now seemed prophetic. Already back in the seat of First Lord of the Admiralty, and with such a diverse array of experience, Winston was uniquely placed to accept the position of Prime Minister. From there, he was able to lead Britain and her Empire through the dark days of World War II.

WHAT WAS MASS OBSERVATION?

The brain-child of anthropologist and ornithologist Tom Harrisson, painter and film-maker Humphrey Jennings, and poet and journalist Charles Madge, Mass Observation was a social research organization described as “a scientific study of human social behaviour, beginning at home.”⁷ As an anthropologist, Harrisson was interested in the study of people and societies. With much of the work in the anthropological field being done on ancient societies by professional anthropologists, the aim of the Mass Observation project was different. As explained in the first booklet, “*Mass-Observation* intends to work with a new method. It intends to make use not only of the trained scientific observer, but of the untrained observer, the man in the street. Ideally, it is the observation by everyone of everyone, including themselves.”⁸

Diaries were kept by about 1500 participants from all walks of life, and from all over the United Kingdom. Participants (herein referred to as *diarists*) included students, housewives, professionals, retirees and active service men. They ranged in area from Northern Ireland to the far reaches of Scottish islands and remote Welsh peninsulas, with concentrations in large English cities such

⁶ K. Martin, *The New Statesman*, 7 January 1939.

⁷ C. Madge & T. Harrisson, *Mass Observation* (London, 1937), p. 10.

⁸ Madge & Harrisson, *Mass Observation*, p. 10.

as London, Sheffield and, Manchester. The diaries were free-form with no particular content or format guidelines given by Mass Observation. Most read like private diaries, recording the day to day lives of their writers and often include very personal details.

Another significant component of the Mass Observation archive is its collection of monthly 'directives'. In contrast with the diaries wherein diarists wrote whatever came to mind, the directives were lists of specific questions for each diarist to answer. These questions ranged from the esoteric "How are you forming your opinions at present?" (January 1940), to the topical "What are your present feelings about America's war-effort and her part in the war?" (July 1942), to the social "What is your general opinion about the continuance of big sporting events in wartime?" (March 1942). There were often questions about current events and news items, and the same questions were often asked multiple times over the course of the war. For example, the question "What are your views on the political truce" was asked nearly a dozen times and it is interesting to follow the progress of how that question was answered by the individual diarists. For some diarists, their answers remained fairly consistent over the years, and for some, their answers changed dramatically.

In addition to the diaries and directives, the archive contains the day surveys, and topic collections which make up the source materials for the 25 books published by Mass Observation. The Mass Observation archive is a treasure trove for historians, students, and people with even a passing interest in history. While this paper looks specifically at the war years of 1939 through 1945, Mass Observation received diaries through to 1967.

While Mass Observation had paid employees that went into working class areas to ask questions and record observations, it must be acknowledged that the diaries and directives that were submitted regularly were done so by those that had the free time and inclination to participate. A woman with five children that left the house to work and whose husband was away fighting, likely did not have the time or the energy to commit to Mass Observation. Because of this, although the Mass Observation database is large and diverse, it is not entirely representative.

A CROSS SECTION OF FEMALE MASS OBSERVERS AND THEIR FEELINGS TOWARD CHURCHILL

This paper will focus on six women who submitted diaries and directive responses to Mass Observation through the war years, and their attitudes toward Winston Churchill and his wartime leadership. These six women range in age, marital status, political persuasion, and geographic location. They each submitted extensive diary and directive responses spanning several years, which allows the reader to get a feel for their personalities, feelings, and thought processes. Some of the women maintained fairly consistent feelings toward Winston Churchill, whereas others had feelings that changed over time. For the purposes of this paper, the women will be referred to by their given names. Such familiarity would have been uncommon in the 1940's but is more in keeping with modern conventions.

NELLIE UNDERWOOD

Mrs. Nellie Underwood, was in her late 30's when she began her Mass Observation diary. She was a middle-class married housewife and a freelance writer. When the call went out for women to enter the work force, she found a job as an office clerk in a Sheffield steel factory. She and her husband (a veteran of the Great War) lived in a high rise block of flats with all the mod-cons of central heating, electricity, and plumbing. She was very articulate and had strong views on politics, the role of women, sex, class and race.

Nellie's Mass Observation contributions began in the summer of 1941 so it is not possible to know what her thoughts were when Churchill first accepted the post of Prime Minister. That being said, from the earliest entries in her diary it is clear that she was firmly in favour of Churchill's wartime leadership, and there is no doubt she felt he was the only person for the job. Nellie loved the style of

Churchill's oration and appreciated his straight talk and truculence. In response to his *Warning to Japan*⁹ speech Nellie wrote "that is the way our Govt shd deal with everything, be firm, be exact, and perfectly clear. Folk prefer it and applaud it."¹⁰ She also felt Churchill was to be "admired for not raising false hope."¹¹ Nellie appreciated that he did not avoid difficult subjects, and did not sugar-coat unpleasant realities – writing that he was "always wary and never given to promising much except a hard trail."¹²

Nellie, South African by birth and having also lived in Australia before settling in England, mentioned frequently how frustrated she felt that average citizens knew little of the world outside of Britain. In her view, the fact that Churchill had an American mother meant that he, like her, had a better understanding of the wider world. She mentions his American-ness on several occasions and in response to his *Speech to the U.S. Congress*¹³ she wrote "well, Churchill is half American so he shd know how to handle them, and seemingly he does."¹⁴ She did however realize that although he was of mixed British and American stock, he was still very much a member of the upper classes through his aristocratic Churchill lineage. With regards to *The Coalmining Situation*¹⁵ speech she wrote of Churchill "I sensed the lack of understanding...I doubt if he can fully see the point of view of the poorer classes. It is an environment he has never known except as an onlooker."¹⁶ This was a point that she made again in response to his speech in the House of Commons on 22 February 1944, when she wrote "he can't see the point of view of the masses, having all his life lived with the nobs...in commenting thus I am not being beastly to him. It just is so and one must realise it."¹⁷

Although she was an enthusiastic supporter of Winston Churchill the man, Nellie resented his forays into party politics, writing "I'm tired of these letters Churchill keeps sending to Tory

⁹ W. Churchill, *War Speeches Vol 2*. (London, 1951), p. 101.

¹⁰ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 11 November 1941

¹¹ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 4 Oct 41

¹² MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 8 June 1943

¹³ Churchill, *War Speeches Vol 2*, p. 445.

¹⁴ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 20 May 1943

¹⁵ W. Churchill, *War Speeches Vol 3*. (London, 1952), p. 45.

¹⁶ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 13 Oct 1943

¹⁷ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 22 Feb 1944

candidates in by-elections. I think they are unfair. It is not done to further war effort, but to keep Tories in power. It is possible for folk to be with the P.M. in this war but against his politics.”¹⁸ As 1944 progressed, Nellie’s support for Churchill started to wane as he began to act more like a Tory politician and less like the leader of a wartime coalition government. She wrote in her diary “he’s still the old Conservative”¹⁹, even going so far as to record “well, Churchill behaved true to form in the House yesterday. He’d make a good dictator...These Tories never answer direct questions, they only set out to ruthlessly defend their point of view...We must get rid of him soon. He is too much of a fighter to suit us after the war.”²⁰ Even as her feelings for Churchill began to tarnish, Nellie understood that he was making great sacrifices in his role as Prime Minister. She recorded in her diary, “I’ll say this for Churchill, he doesn’t mind where he goes or when, and for a man his age it is highly commendable. I do believe there is nothing he wd not do in his job.”²¹

Nellie’s feelings about Winston Churchill changed over the course of her diary, and by 1945 she did not have the same enthusiasm she did in 1941. Even still, as she listened to Churchill’s VE Day speech with friends she felt some sentimentality, noting “he spoke well and seemed in good form. Everyone agreed that we have been well blest in having such a Leader.”²² A few days later she wrote in her diary “Churchill sounded tired when he spoke on Sunday. I think he should be put out to grass as he calls it. Can’t understand why he doesn’t admit it and be done with it.”²³ When he began his election campaigning, Nellie was frustrated by his mud-slinging and scare tactics, writing “the slanging has begun, and Churchill at his worst doing it. I did not tremble at his bogeyman, Socialism, because I know the other side to the picture. Only the ignorant will fall for that Mr. Churchill.”²⁴

¹⁸ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 10 Feb 1944

¹⁹ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 25 May 1944

²⁰ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 9 Dec 1944

²¹ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 27 Dec 1944

²² MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 11 May 1945

²³ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 15 May 1945

²⁴ MO, Diary, Nellie Underwood, 5 Jun 1945

NAOMI MITCHISON

Mrs. Naomi Mitchison was a wife and mother living in rural Argyll, Scotland. Born in Edinburgh and spending much of her young life in Oxford, she and her husband moved from London to the rambling Scottish stately home of Carradale House just before the outbreak of war. Extremely well educated for a woman of her time and a vocal feminist, she was active in various social causes both before and during the war. Naomi was a prolific writer and although she wrote almost daily in her Mass Observation Diary, an archive of nearly 1500 tightly typed pages, she was also an immensely famous published author. Naomi was an ardent Socialist, and even once described herself as an Anarchist.²⁵ She was active in local Labour politics, and her social circle contained all sorts – from Liberals to Conservatives to Communists. Her political activity and her social position (she would become a Baroness in the post-war years) meant that she personally knew many prominent politicians of the day.

She wrote of Winston Churchill “I don’t think much of him; he is not very intelligent, and he is very much of a dictator” but that she did not “so far see a successor who wouldn’t be worse.”²⁶ Be that as it may, when asked in the November 1942 Mass Observation Directive to rank a list of nine politicians in the order in which she admired/approved of them, she ranked Churchill as second only to Roosevelt.²⁷ Although Naomi did not think much of him, she did not entirely dislike Churchill. She did feel he was the best man for the job, and she did occasionally enjoy his oration. In response to his world broadcast on 27 April 1941, she wrote “I thought Churchill rather good... he has a real voice, and one appreciates rather more his dirty cracks at Musso.”²⁸ Nevertheless, she felt him to be too dictatorial for her liking, and wrote “I think everyone is worried about Churchill’s increased arrogance...and lack of responsibility towards the democracy he is supposed to be leading.”²⁹

²⁵ MO, Diary, Naomi Mitchison, 21 May 1940

²⁶ MO, Directive, Naomi Mitchison, Jan 1942

²⁷ MO, Directive, Naomi Mitchison, Nov 1942

²⁸ MO, Diary, Naomi Mitchison, 27 April 1941

²⁹ MO, Diary, Naomi Mitchison, 27 July 1941

In order to safeguard her mental health, Naomi purposely did not pay attention to the war in as great a detail as many of the other women did. She wrote “I hate all the things that are like the last war. I don’t want to know about different kinds of tanks or planes, uniforms, military terms, all the things that interested me last time...But it makes one feel inferior, out of it, standing sniffily apart from the overwhelming common interest...No feeling of pride about it; I don’t even think I’m right. It’s not of the head, but of the heart.”³⁰ Throughout her diary she writes numerous times in relation to Winston Churchill, and the reader is left with the impression that although he was certainly not held in the highest of esteem, his chief transgression was that he was a Tory. Naomi was vehemently anti-Conservative, and any Conservative Member of Parliament, no matter their personality, leadership style, or successes, would not have had her respect.

ADELAIDE POOLE

Miss. Adelaide R. Poole was a retired woman living alone in her little cottage in the tiny Sussex village of Steyning. Although she did not specifically state her political party alliance in her diary, her personal feelings were somewhat radical and socialist leaning. A retired nurse already in her twilight years at the outset of World War II, Adelaide had held nursing positions on the continent and in America in her younger years, and had nursed British troops on the frontlines of the Great War. She wanted to participate in the war effort and did attempt some war work, but her age and physical health would not allow it. Although not able to actively participate in this war, she viewed her Mass Observation diary as her contribution to the war effort. She kept well informed of politics and current events, and used her participation in Mass Observation as a reason to query friends and neighbours about their opinions in order to include them in her submissions.

Adelaide’s support of Winston Churchill was strong right from the start of her diary. In 1939 she wrote “it is hard on Churchill. He has foretold all this and implored for steps to be taken to put

³⁰ MO, Diary, Naomi Mitchison, 10 Feb 1941

us in a state of defence. The P.M. and others have jeered at him and flouted him.”³¹ She felt that his appointment as First Lord of the Admiralty had put him in a difficult position “instead of Churchill having been in power to prepare, he was shoved in at the last minute... Yet he will be blamed for what happens in the navy.”³² She went as far as to write to Mrs. Churchill telling her how much faith people had in Winston Churchill, and felt it a shame that “he had not been in his rightful place five years ago.”³³ When Churchill was finally appointed to the role of Prime Minister, Adelaide was so pleased, noting that all of the people she had spoken to “trust Mr. Churchill, and he is the only one they care about.”³⁴ Countless times throughout the dark days of 1941 and 1942, Adelaide continued to record her feelings of trust and support. “We want no better than the Prime Minister. We trust him, not chiefly because of what he has said and done since he took office, but because he opposed Chamberlain and all his works when most of the other members of Parliament and the Press were upholding him.”³⁵

As much as she supported Churchill, there were small things that annoyed her. She voiced her incredulity at a photo that appeared in the newspaper – in the tone of a disapproving mother hen she wrote “I don’t like this publicity stunt of Mr. Churchill supposed to have piloted for a time that plane... One woman said how fine it was. I said it was rot... he most certainly never really flew the plane. Far too much depended on it. I hate this sort of thing, and Mr. Churchill does not need it to make him popular, like an American third-rate politician standing for office.”³⁶

In the summer of 1942 the general public was chomping at the bit for a second front. When a friend complained of Churchill’s inaction, Adelaide responded by saying “No one in this country wants to see our victory more than Churchill. If he thought we had any chance of success in invading the continent, he would do it. It is absurd for us to pretend to judge for him and his advisors.”³⁷ She

³¹ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 15 Sept 1939

³² MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 15 Sept 1939

³³ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 23 July 1940

³⁴ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 7 Aug 1940

³⁵ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 17 Feb 1942

³⁶ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 20 Jan 1942

³⁷ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 18 July 1942

understood that Churchill had learned some tough lessons about invasion earlier in his career, and was not in a hurry to push forward until the time was right. Through the first two years of war when almost all the news seemed bad, Adelaide never blamed Churchill. Her trust in him and his leadership was absolute. She noted in her diary “If Churchill can’t win this war, I know I can’t, and I know no one in Britain who can. So I leave it to him.”³⁸ As 1942 came to a close and the people of Britain finally began to hear of some far off victories, her faith remained unshakeable. She felt “Churchill has ever been cautious, as he reminds us, and if he says it is going well, then it is.”³⁹

Adelaide’s pride in Winston Churchill, and in her foresight to have support him from the beginning, was palpable when she wrote

I listened to the account of the ceremony at the Guildhall when Churchill was given the freedom of the City, and so praised, I was glad to remember that I did not wait for victories to praise and tell him what I thought of him. I wrote to Mrs. Churchill in the dark days of June 1940, when the great Tory majority were sitting sullenly silent when he entered the House, and were defiantly cheering the weak Chamberlain to show their dislike of Churchill, and told Mrs. Churchill that to my mind Fate had been pounding and molding Mr. Churchill all his life to make him the man to come to the rescue of the country in its darkest hour.⁴⁰

However, by March of 1944, Adelaide’s diary entries began to show signs of a breakdown in her unwavering loyalty when she wrote “I almost hate Churchill nowadays the way he is answering Members, when they dare to question him. He is more and more like Chamberlain in his last days in power, resenting anyone opposing him in any way. Though they all say they uphold HIM. He is more and more identifying himself with the Tory party, and I am disappointed in him.”⁴¹ Although she had been a strong supporter of Winston Churchill the man, up until that point she had viewed him as separate from the Tory party. Adelaide was furious when, in April of 1944, he forced a vote of confidence in response to a bill on equal pay, recording in her diary “he has lost the confidence of many of the people of the country. We will not have dictators...I hate such bullying and I find the people I have spoken to round

³⁸ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 13 Nov 1942

³⁹ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 13 Nov 1942

⁴⁰ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 1 Jul 1943

⁴¹ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 8 Mar 1944

here agree with me.”⁴² She went on to write “I admired Mr. Churchill as far back as the last war, and especially when he almost stood alone against the hateful appeasement policy of the Tory Governments, but I wonder if age and illness has not changed him for the worse.”⁴³ Although she became more critical of Churchill’s politics towards the end of the war, she took pleasure in him finally being able to enjoy the fruits of his labour. She wrote of Churchill’s visit to France in the days immediately following the D-Day landings “he deserved the triumph of yesterday, when he returned to France to visit the troops who had also returned, today well equipped, well trained, and ready to meet the Germans, thanks to him.”⁴⁴

Adelaide’s faith in Winston Churchill as a great wartime leader was never in doubt, but, like many of the other women, she showed continued frustration at his forays into party politics. She noted “I have felt very bitter towards Mr. Churchill, for the way he talks to those who disagree with him and dare to criticise him in Parliament”⁴⁵ and “I am afraid that Churchill is slipping. All power corrupts those who hold it.”⁴⁶

MABEL PRATT

Miss. Mabel Pratt was a retired teacher in her late 50’s at the outset of the war. Initially she lived in her own home in London, but later moved in with extended family in the rural village of Bryant’s Bottom. She was a devoted Socialist, vehemently opposed to the wartime coalition government and Churchill specifically. She was opposed to everything he stood for – his imperialism, his class, his warmongering, his overconfidence and his bullying nature. She was critical of the government’s handling of the war both on the home front and the battlefield, and she believed that Socialism was the only reasonable answer to the problems that Britain was facing. While most diarists seemed to enjoy their

⁴² MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 2 Apr 1944

⁴³ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 2 Apr 1944

⁴⁴ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 13 June 1944

⁴⁵ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 17 Dec 1944

⁴⁶ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 17 Dec 1944

Mass Observation writing, it is interesting to consider that Mabel noted in her diary on a very regular basis that it seemed a pointless and inconvenient exercise. One wonders why she bothered to do so.

Mabel made a diary entry in September of 1939 in regards to Neville Chamberlain, which read “I can’t think how anyone can be willing to trust the responsibility for waging war to an old man who a year ago was waving a piece of paper about and saying that he had secured Peace for our time. Yet apparently intelligent people retain their faith in a man so utterly without foresight.”⁴⁷ Based on that opinion, one might think that Mabel would have been happy to have Winston Churchill replace Chamberlain as Prime Minister. Initially her feelings were those of mild indifference. In a diary entry that was typical of her early commentary of Churchill she wrote, “listened to Churchill’s speech: wished he wouldn’t boast.”⁴⁸ In response to his broadcast speech on 11 September 1940 she recorded “I can’t share the Prime Minister’s confidence in our ability to withstand invasion...I can’t understand people’s great confidence in him.”⁴⁹

Mabel’s feelings began to change in the spring of 1941. She wrote “listened to Lord Haw-Haw for a few minutes. What he had to say about Mr. Churchill’s military record was perfectly true – a succession of failures. I wish I could understand how he has obtained his present enormous prestige.”⁵⁰ One cannot help to feel Mabel may have been swayed by Lord Haw-Haw’s propaganda, as just days later she recorded a conversation with her brother (a strong Churchill supporter) wherein she listed all of Churchill’s faults (a list very similar to Lord Haw-Haw’s), finishing with “what credits has he to set against all these debits?”⁵¹ A pivotal point seemed to be in her reaction to Churchill’s *Do Your Worst – And We Will Do Our Best*⁵² speech. Mabel articulated her deep sorrow as she wrote

I could have wept when I listened to the Prime Minister’s speech at the L.C.C. Lunch – not at the speech itself, it was only what I expected from a man who deliberately trained for war & who

⁴⁷ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 17 Sept 1939

⁴⁸ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 20 Jan 1940

⁴⁹ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 12 Sept 1940

⁵⁰ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 7 Apr 1941

⁵¹ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 13 Apr 1941

⁵² MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 14 July 1941

believes in nationalism, domination & exploitation. But I did not expect that an audience which must have consisted largely of members of the Labour Party would cheer wildly every aggressive expression. These men & women, then, would rather have their revenge on innocent Germans than save their own countrymen - & their country's children – from terror, destruction & death.⁵³

She felt strongly enough that the next day her diary entry stated “have written to the Prime Minister to tell him how distressed I was by his speech, and that I do not believe that ordinary men & women are willing to sacrifice their present & future happiness merely for the sake of revenge.”⁵⁴

Over the course of the next year, her comments became increasing more negative and critical, and eventually became overtly hostile. In July of 1942 she wrote

judging Churchill by his words (I dislike intensely his boasts and his futile abuse) and his deeds (in this war as in the last, a series of failures) I feel that he is not fitted to be Premier of a dignified nation fighting for its life. As an Imperialist and Tory, he could not lead us in a true “People’s War”. Because he is obstinate and loves a fight I feel he is dangerous. He certainly has a strong strain of that romantic nationalism which usually passes for patriotism, and which is such a curse to the human race.⁵⁵

Even as the tide of war began to change, her feelings for Churchill as a person did not change. She wrote “in spite of his ability, I very much dislike him; I dislike his speeches, which are so often full of boasts and threats and jibes: I dislike his love of a fight, his Toryism, his intolerance of criticism and his record as a war-leader.”⁵⁶ In addition to her feeling that he was a boaster and a bully, she was particularly annoyed by the fact that while his government was asking people to tighten their belts and make all manner of large and small sacrifices, he felt he was above the law, noting, “the Prime Minister sets a very bad example by being photographed with that everlasting imported cigar in his mouth.”⁵⁷

Where some women found Churchill’s tough talk appealing, Mabel loathed it. In response to his world broadcast on 10 May 1942, Mabel initially “found the speech heartening”⁵⁸ but upon further consideration, the next day she wrote “today the speech seems to me to have been just empty bombast, &

⁵³ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 14 July 1941

⁵⁴ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 15 July 1941

⁵⁵ MO, Directive, Mabel Pratt, July 1942

⁵⁶ MO, Directive, Mabel Pratt, May 1943

⁵⁷ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 7 Mar 1941

⁵⁸ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 10 May 1941

I have been haunted by the thought of the world being hounded on to ruin.”⁵⁹ She recorded her thoughts on the bombing of Cologne and Churchill’s talk of it, writing “a fine ‘new world’ we shall found on the murdered bodies of little children. And Mr. Churchill’s gloating voice is accepted as the authentic expression of the English spirit.”⁶⁰

Mabel was annoyed by the call for a confidence vote in the House of Commons in early July 1942. Her diary entry reads “I don’t know how it’s going to help us for the world to know that Parliament appears to be well-satisfied with a Government that has led us from one disaster to another... When I think of all those men...giving Churchill an ovation, I see no future for this democracy. I think his speech, with its assumption that loyalty must mean loyalty to him, was abominable.”⁶¹

As much as she loathed him, there were a handful of instances in her diary where Mabel recorded some slightly more positive comments. In response to his *A Four Years Plan*⁶² speech, she wrote “no boasts & few threats, for once...It didn’t seem to me that there was really much in the speech, though I liked the idea of a Four Year Plan.”⁶³ She seemed to be coming around a little in her feelings toward Churchill, even admitting “I listened to Churchill’s speech, and thought he was good – he spoke so much more quickly than usual. Yet he didn’t really say much.”⁶⁴ While the reader initially wonders if Mabel might be forming a slightly less critical view of Churchill as the time passes, one quickly realises that this period of passive tolerance is relatively short lived. On 7 September 1943, Mabel made a diary entry that seems to sum up her feelings for Winston Churchill when she wrote

I can’t help thinking that he is enjoying the war so much, he will in a way be sorry when it’s over. Yes, this is how this horrible orgy of destruction looks to our romantic Prime Minister. ‘How proud we ought to be, young & old, to live in this tremendous, thrilling, formative epoch in the human story’. Who would think that the young of the world have all their energies directed to their mutual destruction, that this thrilling epoch requires that, nightly, families shall be buried

⁵⁹ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 11 May 1941

⁶⁰ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 31 May 1942

⁶¹ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 2 July 1942

⁶² Churchill, *War Speeches Vol 2*, p. 424.

⁶³ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 21 Mar 1943

⁶⁴ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 19 May 1943

under their homes, babies burned to death, and the heritage of civilization reduced to ruins. I wish we had a realist to lead us.⁶⁵

As vehemently as she expressed her dislike, it is somewhat surprising that she acknowledged in a later entry that “as a man I don’t like him...yet because he is emotional & his eyes readily fill with tears, my disapproval is tinged with affection.”⁶⁶

EDITH OAKLEY

Edith Oakley was an unmarried woman in early middle-age living in Glasgow with her mother and brother Charlie (a high-up in the Ministry of Aircraft Production). She came from a relatively wealthy family of Conservatives and she herself was a Conservative. Edith was a self-described feminist and a member of several women’s clubs. She was multi-lingual and worked as foreign language correspondent at a coal exporting company, until 1943 when she took a position as secretary in the U.S. War Shipping Administration, and finally ending up in an accounting firm at the end of the war. Edith viewed her task for Mass Observation as one of engaging others about current events, and reporting those in her diary. In order to do this, she made shorthand notes and later typed them into long form diary entries. This method means Edith’s diary includes near verbatim transcripts of conversations and lively debates between herself and others.

Edith began her Mass Observation diary in 1939, so writing on her thoughts and feelings about Winston Churchill began in the period before his appointment as Prime Minister. Although she was still a strong supporter of Chamberlain in 1940, Edith took a liking to Churchill as Prime Minister right away, writing “he makes you feel that you are on the winning side.”⁶⁷ While some diarists felt Churchill was too boastful and overbearing Edith enjoyed the content and style of his oration, writing that “Mr.

⁶⁵ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 7 Sept 1943

⁶⁶ MO, Directive, Mabel Pratt, Dec 1945

⁶⁷ MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 19 Dec 1939

Churchill was brought up in the army and his language was more Sandhurst than Oxford University.”⁶⁸ Referencing his broadcast speech of 11 September 1940, Edith wrote “he makes articulate what the nation thinks and feels.”⁶⁹ In response to Churchill’s world broadcast on 27 April 1941, Edith noted that “Mr. Churchill’s remarks were sober, but did not strike me as depressing. Mother in fact thought that his speech was a tonic.”⁷⁰ Edith’s comments on the vast majority of Churchill’s speeches were positive, if not downright glowing. While some people blamed Churchill personally for any wartime failure, Edith understood that the management of the war was a group effort and no one person shouldered all of the responsibility. In response to the fall of Singapore, she wrote “People say Mr. Churchill has taken on too much, he is a dictator, etc. but when asked if they want Mr. Churchill to go, they hastily reply, ‘no, but they want to see about half the cabinet go’.”⁷¹

Partway through the war Edith left the coal company she had been working for and took a job with the U.S. War Shipping Administration, and she referenced her American boss regularly in her diary. She was confounded by his ignorance of British culture and was quite resentful of his cheap shots at Winston Churchill. On one instance he made disparaging remarks, insinuating Churchill had travelled all over the world but that he never did any good anywhere. Edith recorded her response “Mr. Churchill did roam the world and his knowledge and experience has been a great asset to this nation’ but Capt. Macgowan said it meant he had gipsy [sic] blood in his veins. I gasped ‘Gipsy blood! If he has any gipsy blood it must be through his American mother’. Strange as it may seem, this conclusion of mine was received as a compliment to the American nation.”⁷²

As strongly as Edith supported Churchill she did notice in the days after his VE Day announcement that he seemed “tired out”.⁷³ Edith remained faithful to Churchill to the end, and was

⁶⁸ MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 16 Nov 1939

⁶⁹ MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 11 Sept 1940

⁷⁰ MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 28 April 1941

⁷¹ MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 16 Feb 1942

⁷² MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 9 Sept 1943

⁷³ MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 14 May 1945

delighted to see him when he made a campaign stop in Glasgow. She was so excited to hear “his real, natural voice.”⁷⁴ She even mentioned that “there was for Scotland a surprising amount of cheering.”⁷⁵

ANNIE SCHOFIELD

Mrs. Annie Schofield was a former teacher living with her police constable husband in the Yorkshire city of Bradford. She was in her early 40’s with a son at Oxford when the war began. Annie was outgoing and a member of several social clubs and volunteer war organizations. Although Annie considered herself non-political⁷⁶ and did not belong to or identify with any specific political party⁷⁷ she did follow current events closely. She contributed to her diary on a daily basis for several years, which allows the reader to gain significant insight into her thoughts and feelings. Annie was not initially pleased with Winston Churchill’s appointment as Prime Minister. She admitted that she had to “get rid of some prejudices with regard to Churchill.”⁷⁸ Among those prejudices, she recalled the feeling as influenced by her father, that Churchill was a “feather-brain” and detailed a list of grievances going back to the Boer War.⁷⁹ By January of 1942 she had moved away from her father’s views and wrote “while I wouldn’t say that Churchill is infallible, I think he is the only man for the Premiership at the moment.”⁸⁰ Annie, like many of the other diarists, was unhappy with Churchill’s acceptance of the Tory leadership, noting “I wish he could have seen his way to cut adrift from the leadership of the Conservative Party.”⁸¹

Where some women found Churchill too boastful, Annie did not have that opinion. She found his cautious optimism and calls for diligence and hard work to be exactly appropriate, and very British. In contrast, she wrote “Roosevelt, the super-optimist again! ‘Almost the beginning of the end’! I

⁷⁴ MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 28 June 1945

⁷⁵ MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 28 Jun 1945

⁷⁶ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, Nov 1942

⁷⁷ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, Sept 1943

⁷⁸ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, Jan 1942

⁷⁹ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, Jan 1942

⁸⁰ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, Jan 1942

⁸¹ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, Jan 1942

do wish the Americans would be a little more circumspect.”⁸² While many women made remarks about the juxtaposition between Churchill’s well-bred mannerisms and his tough-talking ways (some in favour and some not), Annie was absolutely in favour, writing “I do like the streak of the ‘gutter-snipe’ that peeps out occasionally.”⁸³ While some women had reservations about his threats, veiled or otherwise, Annie had no such reservations. In response to his *A Warning to Japan*⁸⁴ speech, Annie wrote “Churchill sounded very confident to-day. I liked his hint to the Japs about the new air-craft carriers we have. Japan – a dream of a target for a bomber. Sounds blood-thirsty – but as we are in a ‘total’ war, let’s go ‘total’ and get it over.”⁸⁵

Annie mentioned several times throughout her diary of the sway Churchill seemed to have over people, and women in particular. She felt that his speeches, although not overly optimistic, were almost always comforting, and he was a regular topic of conversation amongst her women friends. The phenomena amongst her circle of women was such that Annie remarked “we shall be having ‘Churchill-worship’ in this country, similar to the ‘Fuhrer-worship’ in Germany.”⁸⁶

THE GENERAL ELECTION OF 1945 - WHAT HAPPENED?

Of course, one cannot discuss Churchill’s wartime leadership without discussing the Conservative loss of the 1945 general election. Winston Churchill’s approval ratings were the stuff of political fairy dreams. From the time he became Prime Minister in 1940, his monthly approval ratings remained firmly in the 80-90% range, with a one month drop to 78% in July 1942 and several jumps into the 90% range from November 1942 through to April 1945.⁸⁷ The British people were focused on

⁸² MO, Diary, Annie Schofield, 11 July 1943

⁸³ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, Jan 1942

⁸⁴ Churchill, *War Speeches Vol 2*, p. 101.

⁸⁵ MO, Diary, Annie Schofield, 10 Nov 1941

⁸⁶ MO, Diary, Annie Schofield, 27 Jan 1942

⁸⁷ G. Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls* (New York, 1976.)

winning the war, and Winston was their fearless leader. But after the worst was over, Britain took a collective breath, looked around, and wondered what would come next.

After nearly six years of war in Europe, and the second global war in recent memory, people were exhausted. They wanted more from their lives than they had in the pre-war days. The opportunity for change had been a long time coming. Edith succinctly wrote “I tremble before the moral, political, economic and social issues to be put right after the war.”⁸⁸ Published in 1942, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, better known as *The Beveridge Report*, whet the public’s appetite for change. The plan had all the makings to support people *from the cradle to the grave*, including social security, education, old age benefits, and universal health care.⁸⁹ A Mass Observation Report summed up the people’s hopes for post-war Britain as “a planned society, with decent houses to live in, a reasonably high standard of living, and a job for everyone. They want a society run on more equalitarian lines, and a society whose outlook is international rather than national.”⁹⁰ Although it was wildly popular with the people, the Conservative Party was opposed to the creation of a *welfare state* in the way that it was proposed in the Beveridge Report. For those old enough to remember the promises made and broken after the last war, there was fear that the same would happen again. In fact, as soon as the war in Europe was over, things seemed to get worse in Britain. With food being sent to the continent, people were asked to tighten their belts even further. Years of mental and physical stress had taken a toll, and people desperately wanted something to look forward to. With the Conservative Party wishy-washy on their willingness to implement a scheme along the lines of the Beveridge Report, and with no real plan in place for housing (by far the primary concern amongst the British in the summer of 1945),⁹¹ just what was the Conservative Party’s election platform? From what the people could see, the Conservative Party’s election platform was predicated on little more than the popularity of Winston Churchill himself.

⁸⁸ MO, Diary, Edith Oakley, 27 Nov 1941

⁸⁹ W. Beveridge, *Social insurance and allied services* (London, 1942).

⁹⁰ MO Report: *What Britain Thinks About the Post-War World*. p. 4.

⁹¹ Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls*, p. 109.

As we can see from the Mass Observation diaries of the six women highlighted herein, Churchill was widely believed to be the best man to lead wartime Britain. Winston Churchill had the necessary tools for wartime leadership, but more than that, he had a way of talking to people that made them feel at ease. He recognised the dangers but remained confident in victory. He also understood the importance of publicity and how to market himself in a subtle but pervasive way – the V sign, the cigars, the bow-ties and the siren suits. One feels that the Conservative Party, in the summer of 1945, was putting heavy stock into Winston Churchill, *the brand*.

During wartime, Britain needed an aggressive leader with a strong stomach, and Churchill fit the bill. He was a natural wartime leader, and his coalition government was able to put aside Party Politics to enact policy that was in the best interest of the war effort. It was an ideal scenario and allowed Winston to manage the war, supported by the best and brightest of all parties. When peace time came, it is clear that these women instinctively felt that Churchill was no longer the right man for the job. In reading the diaries of the six women, most of them felt, likely based on Churchill's approval ratings, that the Tories could, and likely would, win the election. Yet, in reviewing the Gallup results for May and June of 1945⁹², it is clear that a Labour win could have been predicted.

For women like Mabel Pratt and Naomi Mitchison, the opportunity to vote against Churchill in 1945 could not have come soon enough. Dyed-in-the-wool Conservative women like Edith Oakley were always going to vote Conservative. Those votes are really not surprising. The real question is why women like Nellie Underwood, Annie Schofield, and Adelaide Poole – hearty supporters of Churchill during the war years – did not vote for him. As much as the Conservative Party believed they would, they were not going to blindly follow Churchill, no matter how popular he was or how much they liked him. These women were politically aware and carefully considered the issues. Labour's platform of "Let Us Face The Future"⁹³ spoke to their hopes of a post war Britain.

⁹² Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls*, p. 109-111.

⁹³ Calder, *The People's War – Britain 1939-1945*, p. 575.

Wartime rationing had put all classes on fairly equal footing when it came to consumption. Working hours, wages, and conditions were standardized and child care was often looked after by the state. Husbands were frequently away in the forces, but even if they were home, a wife earning an income suddenly had influence in how family money was spent. Middle and upper class young single women, expected to work for the war effort, were no longer cloistered in their family homes. Classes and genders were closer to equal than they had ever been. By and large, women of all classes were experiencing a freedom that was unknown to women of previous generations. Many women worried that a Tory victory would bring back the old status quo and they would lose these newfound freedoms.

While voter turnout on the day was a relatively high seventy three percent, the overseas service vote saw less than half of those eligible cast their vote.⁹⁴ While this may have been a contributing factor, it is likely that the Labour victory would have occurred anyway. Some naively felt that Churchill would remain no matter which party won the election. Annie Schofield recorded a conversation with a woman on the bus “it sounded to me as if she had voted Labour with the foolish hope that somehow Churchill would still be able to take a leading post in affairs even if a Labour Gov’t was functioning.”⁹⁵

As intensely as Adelaide Poole supported Churchill she voted Labour, writing “I would not vote for Churchill, great as he is, now he is head of the Tories.”⁹⁶ Nellie Underwood also strongly supported Churchill’s wartime leadership but she voted “for the Labour man.”⁹⁷ Annie Schofield, a Churchill supporter during wartime, voted for an independent candidate.⁹⁸ On hearing the results she quipped “I think the Labour Party will be so surprised at the overwhelming majority that they have got, that they will feel rather like a young father faced with triplets. I don’t envy them.”⁹⁹ Even Naomi Mitchison, wife of a Labour candidate was somewhat surprised by the Labour landslide, noting “the

⁹⁴ Calder, p. 575.

⁹⁵ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, 26 July 1945

⁹⁶ MO, Diary, Adelaide Poole, 6 May 1945

⁹⁷ MO, Directive, Nellie Underwood, Nov 1945

⁹⁸ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, July 1945

⁹⁹ MO, Directive, Annie Schofield, July 1945

weight of what we had to do now was becoming very heavy.”¹⁰⁰ Upon hearing the election results, Mabel Pratt wrote “I had been steeling myself during the past few days against too great dismay if, as I half expected, the Tories completely swept the country...I took the results for granted, and I felt quite queer. Mr. Attlee leading us in the adventure of Socialism, while the world is on the brink of disaster! It’s what I voted for, and in the end it should be safer to have a government that is prepared to make great changes: but there is inevitable so much trouble ahead of us.”¹⁰¹

As a politician, a war leader, and a man, Winston Churchill cannot be pigeonholed. His life spanned a period of such enormous social and technical change. His military career began in an era of mounted cavalry charges and ended with the unimaginable and indiscriminate devastation of an atomic bomb. In 1940, Winston was asked to step into a role that might have seemed destined for failure, against an enemy that had been arming and training for years. And he did it. In fact he gloried in it. This was a role he had been building to his whole life. Some would say that the world we know today is thanks in large part to Winston Churchill. Author Gretchen Rubin said of him – “No leader did more for his country than Winston Churchill. Brave, magnanimous, traditional, he was like a king-general from Britain’s heroic past. His gigantic qualities set him apart from ordinary humanity; there seemed no danger he feared, no effort too great for his limitless energies.”¹⁰² The Mass Observation diaries of Nellie Underwood, Naomi Mitchison, Adelaide Poole, Mabel Pratt, Edith Oakley, and Annie Schofield bear that out. No matter their personal feelings for Winston Churchill as a man, no matter their political leanings, all believed that he was the best man to be leading Britain during wartime. Ultimately though, his wartime popularity was not enough to carry his party to victory in 1945. Winston Churchill was an idiosyncratic and complicated man, of that there can be no doubt. While our modern romantic view may be a little more polished than the reality of the war years, there can be no doubt that Winston Churchill earned his revered place in History.

¹⁰⁰ MO, Diary, Naomi Mitchison, 25-28 July 1945

¹⁰¹ MO, Diary, Mabel Pratt, 26 Jul 1945

¹⁰² Rubin, *Forty Ways*, p. 12.

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