

Churchill. By Paul Johnson. New York: Viking Press, 2009. 192 pages. \$24.95. **Reviewed by Major Kirby R. Dennis,** Office of the Secretary of the Army.

Historians have wrestled with the life and reputation of Winston Churchill for decades and, with varying degrees of success, continue to reveal this monumental figure to an increasingly curious readership. Described by many to be the most important figure in twenty-first century history, the essence of Churchill has been the object of study and fascination for biographer and reader alike. In what is an incredibly easy book to read, author and Churchill champion Paul Johnson makes a determined effort to open, examine, and close the debate on Great Britain's greatest Prime Minister in an astonishingly short 166 pages. The brevity of this analysis is perhaps Johnson's greatest gift to the reader. Indeed, those who study history (particularly military history) should know and understand the major themes of Churchill's life, and through Johnson's account, one can do so in a reasonable amount of time. While the importance of other epic biographies—one could describe them as Churchillian—such as Roy Jenkins's *Churchill: A Biography* or Carlo D'Este's *Warlord: A Life of Winston Churchill at War, 1874–1945* cannot be understated, the reality is that many are deprived of knowing Churchill the soldier and statesman not because of a lack of interest, but simply because of a lack of time. Johnson's book, while not capturing every subtlety of Churchill's rise to power, attempts to inform the reader of the major themes through clarity and precision.

In a biography that charts Churchill's course from small boy to aging politician, Johnson pays adequate tribute to a lesser known aspect of Churchill's life, that of a soldier. Describing his earlier service in far-flung areas such as Cuba, India, and South Africa, Johnson aptly describes Churchill's mantra during this time as “finding wars” and “getting special permission to visit or participate in them.” To be sure, Churchill's personal love of soldiering and leading others in battle followed him into politics at the tender age of 26. Following a stint in Parliament and as the First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill found himself the object of political scorn after Britain's resounding defeat at the Dardanelles. As a result, he soon retreated to the secluded life of a painter. The itch to go to the front lines persisted, however, forcing Churchill to drop his paints and canvases in order to command a battalion in the trenches of Flanders in 1915. According to Johnson, Churchill's role at Flanders was formative and proved to be a major asset in later years. Among other things, it enabled him to visualize the many dimensions of warfare through the eyes of the ordinary soldier, a gift few politicians, or indeed generals, possessed at the time. Practically, it resulted in a Prime Minister who brazenly led from the front in times of peril and who insisted on using personal interaction on the front lines as a method to judge the pulse of the war effort.

While replete with tales that illuminate the subject, Johnson's purpose is not simply to describe Churchill the man, but rather, to answer a central question: Did Churchill save Britain? The reader will find the answer both direct and to the point, and in doing so, will have the pleasure of discovering the rationale supporting the author's answer. Neatly packaged in 10 points, Johnson describes the qualities that served Churchill, Great Britain, and the Allied coalition well during World War II. Notable among these were Churchill's powerful gift of oratory, hyper levels of activity and energy, invaluable foresight, and ability to prioritize those things that mattered (in the case of World War II, a singular focus on destroying the enemy). All the while, Johnson seems to take pleasure in describing the man to whom he attributes so much by invoking his own personal experiences with Churchill as a young boy and adolescent.

Additionally, Johnson adds color to the book by highlighting those areas of Churchill's life that, while not always serious, add weight to his persona: a penchant for writing lengthy volumes of history, an artistic skill that most professional painters could not attain over a lifetime of practice, an ability to hunt big game and race cars, and even a keen eye for fashion. While Johnson no doubt injects this into the narrative as a way of reinforcing his own personal view, he does so in a way that keeps the reader interested in Churchill's personal and professional story. More importantly, he does so without detracting from the overall purpose of the book.

For those who approach history with a skeptical eye, this book will most certainly not challenge the idealistic notions of Churchill we have become accustomed to. For those who consider themselves fans of Churchill, Johnson's elegant combination of vignette, poetry, and historical fact will not disappoint. Whatever the cause for reading this book, readers should view the perceived shortcomings, namely the brevity and excessive adoration of the subject, in a different light. While the aforementioned Jenkins and D'Este works, along with countless others, have tried to capture the story of Churchill in wide-ranging biographies that require time, effort, and energy to digest, Johnson serves as the contrarian by delivering a sweeping, yet distilled, account of Churchill that leaves the reader satisfied. The favorable light Johnson casts on Churchill is necessary in answering the book's thesis. One quickly realizes that the point of this book is not to question, doubt, or detract from the multitude of decisions Churchill made as Britain's wartime premier. Nor is the purpose to delve into all of the specific details of his tenure as Prime Minister. Rather, Johnson seeks to illustrate the major things that Churchill got right and to draw general conclusions about him as a leader. In the end, this book is an accomplishment that richly describes a legacy that remains relevant to this day, and just as important, is a profile in leadership from which we all can learn.