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Vol. CXXV, No. 77

Thursday, April 16, 2020

75 Cents

Notable Books

ASHISH JOSHI

Joshi: Attorneys & Counselors

How Churchill taught the British people 'the art of being fearless'

The Splendid and the Vile

By Erik Larson

Published by Crown, New York

601 pages

It was Marcel Proust who said that the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but in seeing with new eyes. Perspective changes everything. The COVID-19 lockdown doesn't appear to be that onerous of a sacrifice (save for the unfortunate ones who have lost a loved one) when one reads about the plight of Londoners during the German aerial assault of 1940-41. How on earth did they endure, night after night, fifty-seven consecutive nights of bombing, followed by a series of horrific nighttime raids over the next six months? Despite the proverbial stiff upper lip of the Brits, it is one thing to say "Keep Calm, and Carry On," but quite another to do so. Erik Larson shows us how. In cinematic detail, Larson shows us how Winston Churchill taught the British people "the art of being fearless." He also shows us how during these years "Churchill became Churchill, the cigar-smoking bulldog we all think we know, when he made his greatest speeches and showed the world what courage and leadership looked like."



For Londoners, the doom was visible on the horizon. The man in the street was warned that "there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed" and that "whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through." A gloom of despair was overcast with prophecies that the bombing raids would cause such terror that millions would go insane and London "will be one vast raving bedlam." And when the day came, it brought the worst fears true. The sky was full of hundreds of planes dropping incendiaries and bombs on the hapless citizens below. As bombs detonated, "buildings erupted, thunderheads of pulverized brick, stone, plaster, and mortar billowed from eaves and attics, roofs and chimney, hearths and furnaces—dust from the age of Cromwell, Dickens, and Victoria." The novelist Graham Greene observed "the purgatorial throng of men and women in dusty torn pajamas with little blood splashes standing in doorways."

But if it was a time for despair, it was also a time for courage, heroism, and leadership. Churchill quickly revealed himself to be a very different kind of leader than what Britain was used to. Where Neville Chamberlain was staid and deliberate, Churchill was flamboyant, electric, and unpredictable.

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JOSHI:*Churchill showed us leaders are expected to give truthful, sobering accounts*

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And the effect was immediate and galvanic. Government's workload increased to unimagined levels—led by Churchill who spared none, including himself. No detail was too small to draw his attention, and often, ire. While bombs fell and guns blazed, Churchill raged at misspellings and nonsensical phrases, which he attributed to sloth. He insisted that ministers compose memoranda with brevity and limit their length to one page or less. Churchill's own communiqués “tumbled forth daily, by the dozens, invariably brief and always written in precise English.” On the whole, the effect of Churchill's wartime premiership was “like the beam of a searchlight ceaselessly swinging round and penetrating into the remote recesses of the administration—so that everyone, however humble his rank or his function, felt that one day the beam might rest on him and light up what he was doing.”

But it wasn't all work; the man also knew the value of play. Larson masterfully recounts stories of dinner soirees at Churchill's home where he would gather the country's movers and shakers—industry captains, ministers, private secretaries, military leaders, artists, advisors—together with his family members and over cigars, champagne, and brandy, recite poems, share stories, and “discussed the war with an animation that verged

on delight.” And he loved to sing! One popular song chanted by Churchill was:

“Bang, bang, bang, bang goes the farmer's gun,

Run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run, run, run.”

The song became wildly popular later in the war when the word “rabbit” was substituted by “Adolf.” Another strength of Churchill was his sense of perspective, which gave him the ability “to place discrete events into boxes, so that bad humor could in a heartbeat turn to mirth.” Snarling at a newspaper boy on the street to stop whistling (which he hated), Churchill was stunned and angered by the boy's retort, “Well, you can shut your ears, can't you?” But the anger quickly gave way to a smile and ultimately laughter as Churchill, walking on, kept on repeating the boy's feisty rejoinder under his breath.

He was a tough leader but was never afraid to express his emotion, at times weeping openly. Larson narrates how Churchill, in touring the bombed sites, was overcome by the devastation and the resilience of the British people and wept openly: “In one hand he held a large white handkerchief, with which he mopped his eyes; in his other he grasped the handle of his walking stick.” The crowds adored him and shouted at him: “Good old Winnie! We thought you'd come and see us. We can take it. Give it 'em back.”

While he spoke with confident,

bulldogged aggression, vowing to achieve victory, Churchill was also “a realist who understood the black terrain in which Britain now lay.” He never shied away from speaking the solemn and somber truth. To the British people, Churchill's speeches offered a sober appraisal of facts, tempered with reason for optimism. “It would be foolish to disguise the gravity of the hour,” he said, adding, “it would be still more foolish to lose heart and courage.” One sentence that has gained immortality from Churchill's speeches: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.”

Larson reveals a Dickensian knack at creating flesh-and-blood characters that transport us back to the days and times of an era gone by. One of the delights of the book is to read about Churchill's friendship (and on occasions, friction) with Max Aitken, aka Lord Beaverbrook. On his first day as prime minister, Churchill created an entirely new ministry devoted solely to increase the production of fighters and bombers. And to run it, he picked his longtime friend, Lord Beaverbrook—a man who had made his fortune in newspa-

pers, knew nothing about running factories that manufactured aircrafts, and “who drew controversy the way steeples draw lightning.” But what Churchill asked, Beaverbrook delivered. He was a maverick who upset the old ways of doing things, hated committees—“I am the cat that walks alone”—and created enemies all around. An American general stationed in London called him “a violent, passionate, malicious and dangerous little goblin.” Lord Halifax nicknamed him “the Toad.” He was always “wildly entertaining”—a trait Churchill loved and needed. And despite everyone's aversion towards Beaverbrook, Churchill stuck with him. He saw their relationship in succinct terms: “Some take drugs, I take Max.” But it wasn't a relationship without skirmishes. And the battle between the two men was fought with the pen: “Both men took a certain delight in dictating letters to each other. To both it was like acting—Churchill strutting about in his gold-dragon night-clothes and jabbing the air with a dead cigar, savoring the sound and feel of words; Beaverbrook like a knife thrower at a carnival, hurling

whatever cutlery came to hand.”

Larson's book is an inspiring read of Churchill's leadership during a war. The man's splendor is magnified, in multiples, when compared to the vileness of our times and our current self-declared “wartime president.” In war, Churchill showed us how leaders are expected to give truthful and sobering accounts of the battle. Not to proclaim, falsely and blithely, “we have it under control. It's going to be just fine.” He showed us how true leaders take responsibility; I lament at ours who takes no “responsibility at all.” Churchill's words united the British people in collective purpose and shared sacrifice; Trump divides the nation with his petty, trash-talking tweets. The book left me with an emotion that can aptly be summarized by borrowing words used by Oliver Cromwell in 1653: “You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing! Depart, I say, and let us have done with you! In the name of God, go!”

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