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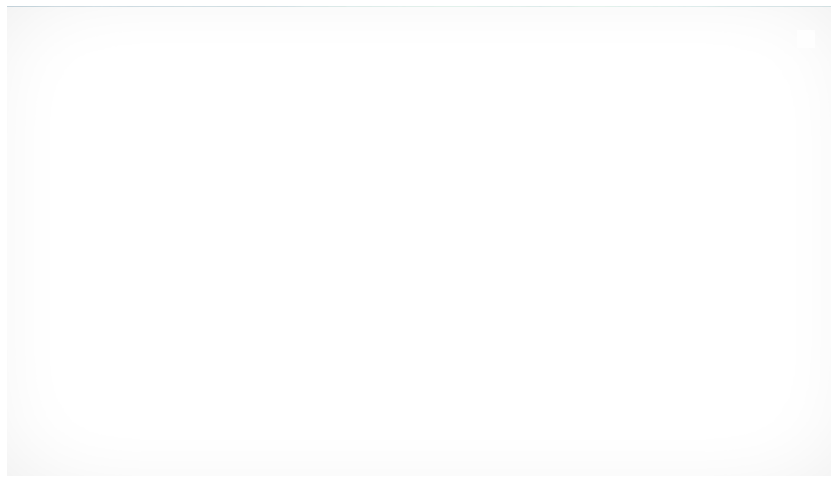
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Oct 4th 2018

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**Churchill: Walking with Destiny.** By Andrew Roberts. *Allen Lane*; 1,152 pages; £35.  
To be published in America by *Viking* in November; \$40.



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IN HIS six-volume history, “The Second World War”, Winston Churchill recalled his thoughts on becoming prime minister in May 1940: “I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.” He had no illusions about his task, or about the threat faced by Western civilisation. By putting into spellbinding words his confidence in victory—if only Britain could stand alone for long enough—he gave his compatriots something nobody else could have instilled: hope.

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The theme running through Andrew Roberts’s terrific new biography is this acute sense of destiny, first manifest when Churchill was a teenager. Despite almost abusive neglect by his parents—the dazzling but self-destructive Conservative politician Lord Randolph and his beautiful, rich American wife—Churchill saw in himself the possibility of greatness. Inspired by the example of his ancestor the first Duke of Marlborough, he set about constructing a career that would turn this inkling into a reality. Even during his so-called “wilderness years” in the 1930s, when Churchill found himself out of government for almost the first time since 1906, and scorned for his warnings about appeasing Hitler’s Germany, he continued to lay the foundations of his future wartime leadership.

By drawing on many previously untapped sources, Mr Roberts has produced a more complete picture of his subject than any previous biography. His certainly knocks into a cocked hat Boris Johnson’s boisterously self-referential effort of a few years ago. The case it makes for Churchill’s greatness is incontestable. More unusually,

the author makes him lovable. The vulnerability stemming from his lonely childhood; his frequently self-deprecating wit (Churchill's jokes are often genuinely funny); his generosity towards his most bitter political foes; his loyalty to a close circle of often quite unlikely friends; and his unfailing courage, both physical and moral, are all immensely attractive.

Yet Mr Roberts does not gloss over the many examples of terrible judgment that littered Churchill's career before (and even after) becoming prime minister, errors which created a widespread perception that, while brilliant, energetic and matchlessly eloquent, he was also unreliable, excessively passionate, even dangerous. The charge sheet is long: his opposition to votes for women (later regretted); as First Lord of the Admiralty during the first world war, pressing on with the Dardanelles operation long after it should have been abandoned; sending the brutal Black and Tans into Ireland as war secretary; re-joining the Gold Standard as chancellor of the exchequer in the 1920s; backing the awful Edward VIII during the abdication crisis (also later regretted); vainly resisting Indian self-government (Churchill held conventional Victorian views about the superiority and obligations of the "white races" that he never truly recanted). And so on.

Over-confident of his prowess as a strategist, he made serious mistakes during the second world war, too. He failed to foresee either Japan's entry into the conflict or its fighting capacity. He convinced himself that Italy's mountainous spine, defended by crack German divisions, might constitute a "soft underbelly" to attack.

But he got the three biggest things right: the threats posed by Prussian militarism before 1914, by Soviet communism after 1945 and by Nazism in between. As Mr Roberts observes: "The important point about Churchill in 1940 is not that he stopped a German invasion that year, but that he stopped the British government from making peace." An administration led by his rival Lord Halifax would have attempted exactly that, with the support of most of the Tory party.

Churchill could claim important domestic accomplishments in his long political career as well. As a "one nation" Tory who joined the Liberals, he worked with Lloyd George to introduce social protections that alleviated the condition of the poor in Edwardian Britain. Later, as prime minister, he helped to lay the foundations for the modern welfare state. Throughout his life, he had the wisdom to urge magnanimity towards the defeated, whether to South African Boers or Germany after both world wars. At home, after a display of belligerent enthusiasm for breaking the General Strike of 1926, he went on to establish cordial relations with union leaders.

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But it was his use of language that made and makes Churchill extraordinary. As he put it: "I was not the lion, but it fell to me to give the lion's roar." Mr Roberts wisely quotes from any number of debates, letters, articles and books. Although the style can seem dated, the cadence of the sentences and the power of the words are such

that this reviewer found himself reading passages aloud, often with a catch in the throat. In 1953 Churchill was deservedly awarded the Nobel prize for literature. The sheer quantity of the writing is as remarkable as the quality. Mr Roberts calculates that he published 6.1m words in 37 books—more than Shakespeare and Dickens combined—and delivered 5m words in public speeches. The contrast with Donald Trump’s vulgar tweets and Theresa May’s robotic phrases is dispiriting.

Inevitably, this book will be scoured by those seeking to enlist Churchill on one side or other of the Brexit argument. Mr Roberts, an ardent Brexiteer himself, slyly hints that the statesman would have agreed with him because he did not want Britain to be a part of the federal Europe that he called for after the war.

Perhaps, but there is a counter-argument. Churchill was both a romantic and a realist about national power. He observed the decline in Britain’s clout at the Yalta conference with Roosevelt and Stalin. He was not against pooling sovereignty for a purpose, as in 1940 when he briefly proposed a union between Britain and France. He could well have concluded that, shorn of the empire he loved, Britain would exercise less influence in the world and (crucially for him) be of less importance to America outside the European Union than in it. He would certainly have been saddened to see how far his country has fallen, though perhaps not surprised by the incompetence of the political class that brought it to this plight.

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