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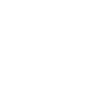
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Finest Hour 146

THE OUTCASTS: WHAT DID CHURCHILL TELL GUY BURGESS AFTER MUNICH?

Reading Time: 7 minutes



Winston Churchill, Parliament Square, London © Sue Lowry & Magellan PR

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FINEST HOUR 146, SPRING 2010

BY MICHAEL DOBBS

Mr. Dobbs is author of four Churchill historical novels (reviewed in FH 117, 122, 126, 131) in which characters and episodes are carefully researched from life. The spy Guy Burgess appears in the first, *Winston's War*. For Martin Gilbert's account of the actual Burgess-Churchill meeting see his *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. V, *Prophet of Truth 1922-1939* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 990-92; and Companion Volume V, Part III, *The Coming of War 1936-1939* (London: Heinemann, 1982), 1192-96 and 1198-99.

It began over alcohol—a good pub lunch—something of which I'm sure Sir Winston would have approved. I was with two old friends, the celebrated British TV writers Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, who are very knowledgeable about the 1930s. They spoke of how extraordinary it was that Winston Churchill, a man reviled and mistrusted by so many at the time, should have become Prime Minister. It wasn't a topic I was then familiar with—yet something inside me stirred, and without realizing it I set out on a journey that in many ways has changed my life.

I began reading about Winston Churchill, and stumbled across an extraordinary reference to him in a book written by the British politician Tom Driberg about his friend Guy Burgess. It recounted in some detail how Burgess, who was then a BBC producer, had spent much of the day of 1 October 1938 alone with Churchill at Chartwell. The story is likewise recounted by Sir Martin Gilbert in the Official Biography and its relevant companion volume, as referenced above.

There were two fascinating aspects to the Churchill-Burgess meeting. The first was that it was the day after Neville Chamberlain had signed the Munich Agreement and his subsequent promise to adoring crowds in Downing Street that he had brought "peace for our time." For Churchill, a man who had been pursued by Black Dogs after the Dardanelles and other dark days in his life, that October 1st must have been one of the darkest.

The second extraordinary fact is that Guy Burgess, in addition to his duties at the BBC, was even at this stage one of the most notorious of Soviet spies. Such a man with Churchill? It seemed an unnatural combination. So what were they doing?

Driberg left a detailed account that made sense. Both Churchill and Burgess enjoyed drink and disputation; they were both highly opinionated. Crucially, they were both committed to the fight against fascism, and it is inconceivable to me that they didn't debate the future course of events with passion. Churchill would have been pessimistic, Burgess youthfully bullish.

Whereas Sir Martin Gilbert's research is impeccable, any account by Driberg has to be treated with caution—he was himself a KGB spy—and almost none of the histories other than Gilbert's offers even a glancing reference to the meeting. Yet Driberg's book was published in 1956 and Churchill could easily have dismissed it as nonsense. He didn't.

Burgess worked at the heart of Westminster, knew everyone, threw outrageous alcohol-fuelled parties that were attended by politicians, priests and even a few prostitutes—yet when his treachery was uncovered it was difficult to find anyone who had even shared a bus queue with him. Many matters were covered up, files and diaries filleted, Burgess cast into oblivion and exile in Moscow.

After the publication of Driberg's book, nothing was heard of the Chartwell meeting for twenty years. Then Martin Gilbert's *Official Biography*, Volume V, brought the meeting to light in 1976, and the text of Burgess' memo was in Gilbert's relevant document volume in 1982. Now the BBC has made [available online](#) its record of the meeting. Burgess wrote (Gilbert, pages 1198-99):

Mr Churchill complained that he had been very badly treated in the matter of political broadcasts and that he was always muzzled by the BBC. I said I was not myself in possession of the facts and, in any case, had nothing to do with such matters, since I believed that the allotment of space was settled by arrangement and discussion between the BBC and the political parties. I imagine that he was referring to a past controversy that I believe (though I didn't say so) there was over India and election time. He went on to say that he imagined that he would be even more muzzled in the future, since the work at the BBC seemed to have passed under the control of the Government. I said that this was not, in fact, the case, though just at the moment we were, as a matter of courtesy, allowing the Foreign Office to see scripts on political subjects. The point is WSC seems very anxious to talk. [s.] G Burgess

Aside from Churchill feeling he had been kept from the airwaves by the BBC, I suspect they discussed much more. As other BBC archivesshow, Burgess was already notorious for his drinking and his taste for luxuries—so he and WSC probably got on outrageously well!

So impressed was Churchill by the much younger man that when they had finished their conversation at Chartwell, he presented Burgess with a signed copy of *Arms and the Covenant*, his latest book of speeches.

There is much to be learned about the times and the two men by reflecting on this meeting. They had a lot in common, were both outcasts fearful of the future, determined to fight on no matter the cost, even though they viewed the world through entirely different lenses. History is filled with ironies. A few years after this meeting, one of them came to be regarded as the greatest man Britain had ever produced, the other as one of its greatest traitors.

Yet such a vacuum is an open invitation to a dramatist. I have used it in my writings to try to get to grips with the isolation and the passion of Churchill, and how he was so often forced to rely on informal and even disreputable supporters. Alongside Burgess we can include Mrs. Churchill's "Three Terrible B's": Brendan Bracken, Lords Birkenhead and Beaverbrook. WSC tended to romanticize in his own histories, drawing a veil over the personal hurts he must have so often experienced and felt. Yet it is those personal hurts that drove him on, obsessed him even, ever since his childhood when his father turned his back so cruelly on his young son.

Churchill was a complicated individual, and encounters with men such as Burgess provide a valuable insight into what made him so different from others. If in the dramatic process I exaggerate the importance of Burgess by suggesting that a Soviet agent could actually have been of help to Churchill, it at least gives us pause for thought about the complicated nature of patriotism, and how history often makes for odd bedfellows.

If the fact of their meeting was ever deliberately covered up, until the diligent Martin Gilbert unearthed it in 1976, one place those responsible forgot to look was within the files at the BBC, where Burgess was required to record his activities—and where the records lay all the time!

Note: Driberg's book, *Guy Burgess: A Portrait with Background*, was published in 1956 by Weidenfeld and Nicolson. For more information about Michael Dobbs's novels, radio documentary and television play about Sir Winston Churchill, please visit [www.michaeldobbs.com](#).

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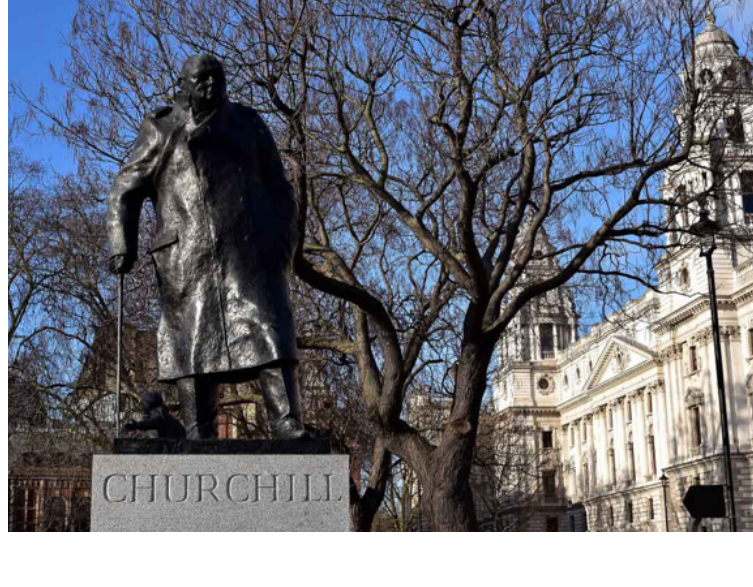
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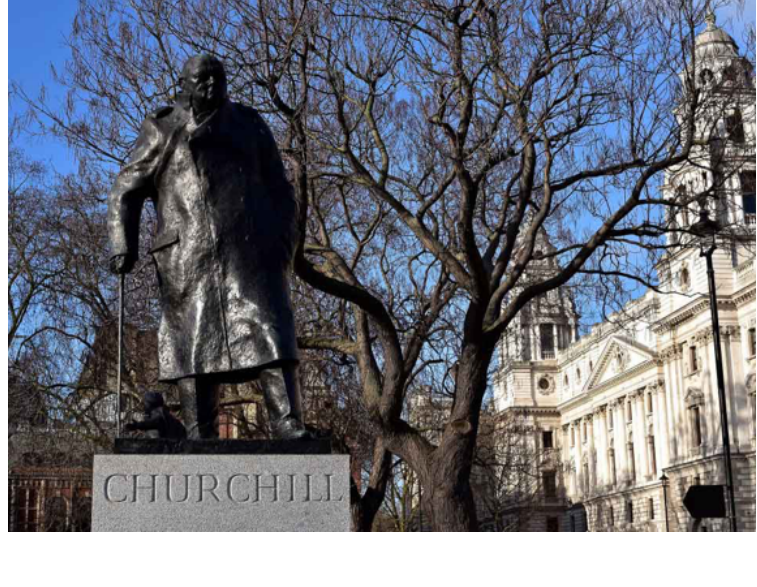
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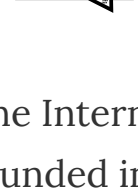
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