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## Winston Churchill — Paul Johnson's Worthy Biography

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This past Sunday marked the 45th anniversary of the death of Sir Winston Churchill, the man widely regarded as the greatest leader of the twentieth century. Churchill's life was large in every way. Born in the splendor of Blenheim Palace on November 30, 1874, Churchill's life would span the most decisive years of the transition into the modern world. Though faced with great adversity — and driven by a titanic self-confidence — he would emerge as the man who saved England from collapse in its darkest hour.

In my personal library I have two entire sections devoted to Churchill's own works and books about him. The most massive biography of Churchill is the multi-volume official biography written by Randolph Churchill and Martin Gilbert. In recent years, significant single-volume biographies have been written by both [Martin Gilbert](#) and [Roy Jenkins](#). Shorter works have been written by historians such as [John Keegan](#). Those who love Churchill cherish the [two volumes](#) written by [William Manchester](#), and lament that the third volume will never be written. Biographical studies on Churchill have been offered by figures ranging from [Lord Moran](#), his personal physician, to the philosopher [Isaiah Berlin](#). Yet, until now, no shorter biography has done Sir Winston justice. Until now, that is, for the publication of *Churchill* by Paul Johnson fills that lamentable gap in the literature.



Johnson is a well-known British historian and a man of ideas. His books have their own honored place in my library, ranging from *Modern Times* and *Intellectuals*, to his *History of the American People*. With *Churchill*, he succeeds where others have failed. He captures Winston Churchill in under 200 pages of elegant and clear prose. The reasons for Johnson's success are these — he knows how to write, he knows the history of the era, and he knows Winston Churchill. Johnson never gets over his admiration for the great man, but he sees him in honest and very human terms.

Johnson is a master of the English language, as was Churchill. Noting Churchill's famous oratory — one of his major weapons of warfare — Johnson remarks that “he switched it on to its full power just as Hitler switched his off.”

Johnson traces Churchill's life from his rather tragic childhood to the glory of his funeral service, an occasion of Britain's most severe mourning. He deals honestly with his shortcomings, character flaws, and setbacks. But he never loses sight of the man's greatness, nor the importance of his place in history. Paul Johnson's *Churchill* is now the first book I would recommend to anyone who would ask why Winston Churchill still matters. Lest anyone miss the lessons of the biography, Johnson offers five important lessons from Churchill's life in an epilogue. *Churchill* will please those who know little about Winston Churchill, as well as those who know a great deal.

An excerpt:

*In his ninety years, Churchill had spent fifty-five years as a member of Parliament, thirty-one years as a minister, and nearly nine years as prime minister. He had been present at or fought in fifteen battles, and had been awarded fourteen campaign medals, some with multiple clasps. He had been a prominent figure in the First World War, and a dominant one in the Second. He had published nearly 10 million words, more than most professional writers in their lifetime, and painted over five hundred canvases, more than most professional painters. He had reconstructed a stately home and created a splendid garden with its three lakes, which he had caused to be dug himself. He had built a cottage and a garden wall. He was a fellow of the Royal Society, an Elder Brother of Trinity House, a Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports,*

*a Royal Academician, a university chancellor; a Nobel Prizeman, a Knight of the Garter; a Companion of Honour; and a member of the Order of Merit. Scores of towns made him an honorary citizen, dozens of universities awarded him honorary degrees, and thirteen countries gave him medals. He hunted big game and won a score of races. How many bottles of champagne he consumed is not recorded, but it may be close to twenty thousand. He had a large and much-loved family, and countless friends.*

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