

Wit and Wisdom of Winston Churchill

By James C. Humes

CHAPTER ONE: *Observations and Opinions*

Next to the Bible and Shakespeare, Churchill is the most frequent source of quotations. Like Shakespeare, he was a supreme master of the English language and was prolific in his writings.

Shakespeare died at age fifty-two and the concentrated verse of his thirty-seven plays left an immeasurable legacy. Churchill, however, in his sixty-five years in Parliament, left eight vast tomes just of his speeches -- and those do not include his many-volumed histories of two world wars and the English-speaking world. In addition, there are the two biographies, of his ancestor, the Duke of Marlborough, and his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, his early autobiographical adventures, his novel, and books encapsulating many of his columns as a journalist.

Of course, in that massive output not every sentence is a crafted gem, but no public papers of any man in history have ever afforded so many wise epigrams, incisive observations, and pungent wit as those of Churchill.

Like Benjamin Franklin -- another historic personality with multitudinous talents -- Churchill was blessed with a robust sense of humor. He had an acute sense of the foibles of man -- the ambitious, the craven, and the pompous. He could also laugh at himself.

No inhibitions bridled this colossal personality. He freely expressed his tastes and opinions on everything from alcohol to Zionism.

As a young officer at the beginning of his career in public service, he read and reread in his barracks his Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. Seven decades later, his words alone could spawn a special edition of that great quotation classic.

Action

I never worry about action, but only about inaction.

If you travel the earth, you will find it is largely divided into two classes of people -- people who say "I wonder why such and such is not done" and people who say "Now who is going to prevent me from doing that thing?"

Adventure

Foolish perhaps but I play for high stakes and given an audience there is no act too daring or too noble.

Adversary

If you cannot best your strongest opponent in the main theater nor he best you; or if it is very unlikely that you do so and if the cost of failure will be very great, then surely it is time to consider whether the downfall of your strongest foe cannot be accomplished through the ruin of his weakest ally, or one of his weaker allies, and in this connection, a host of political, economic and geographical arguments play their part in the argument.

Who can tell how weak the enemy may be behind his flaming front and brazen mask? At what moment will his willpower break?

The short road to ruin is to emulate ... the methods of your adversary.

Advertising

If we are to supply the needs of the modern world it can only be done by publicity...and advertising.

Age

Youth is for freedom and reform, maturity for judicious compromise, and old age for stability and repose.

Air power

One cannot doubt that flying... must in the future exercise a potent influence, not only in the habits of men, but upon the military destinies of states.

The RAF is the cavalry of modern war.

Alcohol

All I can say is that I have taken more out of alcohol than it has taken out of me.

When I was younger I made it a rule never to take a strong drink before lunch. It is now my rule never to do so before breakfast.

No one can ever say that I ever failed to display a meet and proper appreciation of the virtues of alcohol.

Alliances

How much easier is it to join bad companions than shake them off.

If we are together nothing is impossible, and if we are divided all will fail.

Allies

There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies and that is fighting without them.

Ambassadors

The zeal and efficiency of a diplomatic representative is measured by the quality and not by the quantity of information he supplies.

Ambition

Ambition, not so much for vulgar ends, but for fame, glints in every mind.

America

How heavily do the destinies of this generation hang upon the government and people of the United States.¹

The United States is like a gigantic boiler. Once the fire is lit under it, there is no limit to the power it can generate.

The Americans took but little when they emigrated except what they stood up in and what they had in their souls. They came through, they tamed the wilderness, they became "a refuge for the oppressed from every land and clime."

The American eagle sits on his perch, a large strong bird with formidable beak and claws.

There are no people in the world who are so slow to develop hostile feelings against a foreign country as the Americans and there are no people who once estranged, are more difficult to win back.

Anecdotes

Anecdotes are the gleaming toys of House of Commons history.

Analogy

Apt analogies are among the most formidable weapons of the rhetorician.

Anglo-American Alliance

Law, language and literature unite the English-speaking world.

I am myself an English-speaking Union.

You (America) may be the larger and we (Britain) may be the older. You may be the stronger, sometimes we may be the wiser.

Bismarck once said that the supreme fact of the 19th century was that Britain and the United States spoke the same language. Let us make sure that the supreme fact of the 20th century is that they tread the same path.

I read the other day that an English nobleman...stated that England would have to become the 49th state. I read yesterday that an able American editor had written that the United States ought not to be asked to re-enter the British Empire....[T]he path of wisdom lies somewhere between these scarecrow extremes.²

It is not given to us to peer into the mysteries of the future. Still I avow my hope and faith, sure and inviolate, that in the days to come, the British and American people will for their own safety and for the good of all walk together in majesty, in justice, and in peace.