First Lady: The Life and Wars of Clementine Churchill

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In late 1909, a suffragette attacked the Asquith government’s youthful President of the Board of Trade, slashing his face with a whip as he prepared to give a speech in Bristol station. Briefly stunned, he fell toward the station’s tracks at the same moment a train pulled out of the station. Leaping into action as others looked on in horror at the unfolding scene, it was the young politician’s wife who pulled him back – literally by his coat tails – from almost certain death.

Had she failed to react so quickly that morning, the name Winston Churchill would likely be known to only a few historians of the early 20th century. Clementine Churchill’s intervention not only saved her husband’s life but, it is tempting to say, likely carried far-reaching consequences for the course of the country’s future. Remove Churchill from the political scene in 1909 and it is at least conceivable – if not substantially more likely – that Britain in 1940 would reach an accommodation with Hitler’s Germany and the world map would look very different today.

Anecdotes of this type, and the resulting counterfactuals that are difficult to resist considering, are effectively the raison d’être for Sonia Purnell’s new biography of Clementine Churchill (First Lady: The Life and Wars of Clementine Churchill). Without Clementine at his side – sometimes physically, but more often spiritually and through correspondence – Purnell argues that Churchill would have been a very different, and probably much less successful, political leader. On some levels, it is very hard to argue with this: Churchill was often mercurial, arrogant and self-destructive, and it was Clementine who talked him down from the brink of actions that might well have spelled the complete end of his career (particularly following the Dardanelles disaster in the First World War and during the 1930s when he was cast out of power for opposing his own party’s policy of appeasement). Similarly, Purnell is correct when she writes that Clementine has been almost completely ignored by past writers, in part because the source material related to her life has been generally more restricted than that relating to her husband. Clementine deserves to have her story told, and this book is the first recent attempt to do so.

There are a number of important insights contained in Purnell’s book. Perhaps the most interesting come in the first chapters, which consider the young Clementine Hozier’s life. Raised as the daughter of Colonel Henry Hozier and his wife Lady Blanche, there is little doubt that he was not her biological father. Purnell
reports rumours of altercations between Lady Blanche’s various lovers, who probably included Lord Redesdale, the grandfather of the notorious Mitford sisters and the man Purnell seems to endorse as the most likely father (pp. 10–11). Clementine was just six when her parents divorced and over the next few years she endured an extended custody battle and serious financial hardship that taught her the importance of frugality in later years.

Lacking the money to enter high society in a big way, Clementine attended finishing school and met the young Winston Churchill at a ball in 1904. The initial meeting led to nothing, but in 1908 they encountered one another once again. Winston was now in his 30s and, as a rising political star, had faced mockery in the press for being a ‘confirmed bachelor’ without ‘hairs on his chest’ (the unspoken implication, also unmentioned by Purnell, was probably that he was secretly homosexual) (p. 28). Purnell reports that Winston was immediately struck by her intelligence and precociousness while Clementine found him ‘interesting’. The courtship moved quickly and the pair married later that year. It was an unlikely match that aroused much commentary in aristocratic social circles and the popular press alike.

From this point, the narrative becomes more familiar to devotees of Churchilliana. Churchill’s career lurched forward in fits and starts, most notoriously when he switched political parties twice (Clementine herself was a Liberal, as was much of her family) and faced public blame for the Dardanelles catastrophe. Purnell rightly presents Clementine as the voice of reason that tried to talk her husband back from his worst impulses, often unsuccessfully. Living with Winston was far from easy. By one estimate cited by Purnell, the Churchills may have spent 80 per cent of their marriage physically separated, in part because Winston was attending to his career but also because Clementine needed time to recover from her bouts of depression and melancholia (p. 176). In 1921 Clementine was suffering from complete mental breakdown while her husband was away trying to revive his political career. For neither the first nor last time, Churchill the aspiring politician did little to produce Churchill the husband and family man, in large part because of what Purnell calls his ‘self-absorption’ (p. 105).

This latter point is important and one that Purnell rightly considers at length because of the consequences it would later carry. Of the Churchills’ five children, all but one ended up disastrously or in tragedy. The eldest, Diana, was born in 1909 and was immediately ignored by her mother, who appears to have suffered some sort of nervious breakdown perhaps akin to postpartum depression and fled to a cottage near Brighton as quickly as she could (p. 46). The second was a son, Randolph, who soon became the focus of his father’s attention and future familial ambitions but would ultimately be destroyed by his own demons. The third, Sarah, would lurch between marriages and relationships while increasingly turning to drink. The fourth, Marigold, died of an infection in childhood and was rarely mentioned again by her parents. The fifth, Mary, would be the only Churchill daughter to avoid scandal and tragedy (she would later become Lady Soames and died in 2014, outliving her troubled siblings by decades).

How much of this heartache was the fault of the Churchills’ parenting? Purnell suggests a great deal of it may well have been. Winston was primarily interested in his career, often neglecting his wife and children alike, though he seems to have been affectionate toward his children. Clementine appears to have been constitutionally unable to deal with her children, sending them away for long periods and needing time away from the household when they were young. Even later in life, their relationship with their mother was often ‘prickly’ though several grew closer to her with age (p. 166).

The clear favourite, at least for Winston, was Randolph, upon whom he lavished both attention and privileges. Clementine appears to have detested her son, probably not least because of how her husband had spoiled him. Winston would invite the teenage Randolph to dine with cabinet ministers and ensure that his son’s views were heard by raising his cigar to signal silence from the guests (p. 168). Randolph would soon become an embarrassment through his voracious womanizing (often of married women), increasing alcoholism and bald political ambition that occasionally took him into conflict with his own father. Randolph’s conduct would be the source of many arguments between the Churchills.
Purnell’s insights are most significant in the pre-Second World War period, particularly on the personal dynamics of the Churchill household. Indeed, it is only on page 204 (of 360) that we approach the war and Churchill’s political vindication over his pro-appeasement opponents. The reader is assumed to be familiar with the basic narrative of the war’s beginning, and the focus here is firmly on the Churchill family itself. Winston becomes Prime Minister just 11 pages after the war begins, and from this point the narrative shifts toward the family’s personal relationship with representatives of the United States. If Britain were to survive the coming confrontation with Germany, Churchill realized, it could only do so with American support, and therefore courting the Roosevelt Administration became a top priority.

The first American envoy the Churchills ‘seduced’, as Purnell puts it, was Harry Hopkins, a Roosevelt confidant who arrived in Britain in January 1941 on a fact-finding mission. Knowing that Hopkins enjoyed the finer things in life, the Churchills put on an opulent charm offensive (despite the country’s dire economic situation and rationing) to make Hopkins a convinced Anglophile, to the extent that some Americans thought he had been ‘bewitched’ in London (p. 246). American journalist Edward R. Murrow, sent to London to cover the war for CBS, was the next target and soon gained access to Number 10 that no British journalist could match. The American ambassador, Gil Winant, also found himself heavily courted and became a close friend of Clementine in particular (p. 249).

It was with the arrival of W. Averell Harriman, Roosevelt’s special envoy, that this seduction took on a new aspect. In 1939, an increasingly dissolute Randolph had decided that the risk of his going to war was too great for the Churchill line and that he should marry immediately. Tossing out proposals to eligible women as quickly as he was tossing back glasses of liquor, his ninth attempt was successful when he was introduced to Pamela Digby, the beautiful 19-year-old daughter of Dorset aristocrat Lord Digby who accepted his proposal three days after meeting him. Pamela Churchill, as she was now known, was seductive and flirtatious, enjoying the sexual power she possessed over nearly any man. As Randolph had hoped, she quickly became pregnant and gave birth to a Churchill son: Winston Spencer-Churchill, who would later become an MP himself. Randolph himself was in the arms of another man’s wife on the afternoon that his son was born (p. 237).

With Randolph away at war (and continuing his philandering whenever possible), Pamela was 21 when Harriman arrived in London. She was seated next to him at a dinner in the Dorchester Hotel and – briefed on both his political significance and no doubt attracted to him as well – practiced her ‘mating dance’ (stroking his arm with her fingertips, laughing at his jokes) before going to bed with him. Their affair was quickly known to many in the government, but its strategic importance was given significance over all other considerations. Newspaper magnate and cabinet minister Lord Beaverbrook relished the fact that Roosevelt’s envoy had been ‘compromised’ so swiftly. Indeed, Purnell writes that Pamela passed along everything she learned from Harriman to Beaverbrook and her father-in-law, becoming ‘one of the most important intelligence-brokers in the war’ (p. 253).

The question of whether the Churchills were aware of – or even encouraged – their daughter-in-law’s adultery with a strategically-important foreigner has been debated since, and Purnell offers little further insight into the question. Pamela herself later said that the Churchills had to be aware of the affair. Randolph, for his part, was outraged when he learned of the relationship and blamed his parents for the betrayal (p. 254). Given the level of security and surveillance that would have surrounded anyone so closely associated with the Churchills in Second World War London, it seems virtually impossible that they would have been ignorant of the affair.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States formally entered the war on the allied side. Churchill and Roosevelt were now free to meet in person without having to rely on convenient intermediaries, and subsequently the Churchills visited Washington. Purnell’s treatment of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt is somewhat unsympathetic in its comparisons to Clementine. Franklin Roosevelt’s numerous affairs, most notably with his wife’s social secretary Lucy Mercer, had driven the couple into more of a political
partnership than a marriage, which is presented as a contrast with the Churchill’s ‘one woman’ marriage. As a result of this tension, Purnell writes, Eleanor was an appallingly bad cook and did not ‘run a house with Clementine’s attention to detail’. The White House itself was full of ‘dust, filthy threadbare carpets, and curtains in the process of rotting away’ (p. 264). This is no doubt an accurate assessment (in fact the White House required major reconstruction under President Harry Truman, to the extent that the building was actually gutted and the interior rebuilt) but its condition was no doubt also attributable to the economic conditions of the Great Depression and the political difficulties of securing funding to repair the Executive Mansion when Americans were starving rather than Eleanor’s personal whims alone. On the occasion of their first face-to-face meeting, Purnell describes Clementine as ‘beautiful and immaculate’ while Eleanor was ‘plain and slightly windswept’ (p. 269). That said, she rightly acknowledges Eleanor’s political prowess and that she became popular in Britain for indefatigably visiting bombing sites and connecting with the common man and woman.

The final 90 pages of the book deal with the shift from seducing Americans, literally and metaphorically, to dealing with the difficulties increasingly being presented by Stalin’s Soviet Union and the prospect of the post-war world. In late 1944, Winston nearly died during a visit to Carthage and Clementine was summoned urgently to join him. She arrived harbouring a secret: his physician, Lord Moran, had already told her that he had a heart condition that could kill him at virtually any time. She had kept this fact from him, lest the war effort suffer. He pulled through the scare, but Clementine believed that her husband might not live to see much of the post-war world (pp. 293–4) Ironically, he would outlive the war by two decades.

In early 1945, Clementine travelled to the Soviet Union ostensibly to see the work done by her Red Cross Fund but in reality to feel out Stalin on what might happen in Eastern Europe after the war ended. The Soviets were much harder to read than the Americans, Purnell writes, and Stalin even curtly refused her gift of a gold fountain pen to send a defiant message to the British government (p. 314). Regardless, she was greeted with large crowds across the USSR (no doubt thanks in part to government encouragement, despite Stalin’s reluctance to play up the trip in the pages of Pravda). She was in Moscow when the war ended and toasted victory with a glass of champagne in the British embassy.

Purnell’s final chapters chart the post-war history of the Churchill family. Winston and Clementine were now international icons and were viewed favourably by most Britons, despite Winston’s landslide defeat in the 1945 General Election. Clementine had a ‘taste for public duty’ but was ‘in want of a role’, unlike Eleanor Roosevelt, who remained a major player in the Democratic Party for the rest of her life (p. 329) Purnell suggests that this was in some ways regretful for Clementine, who had come to see herself as a political force in her own right, and again highlights the contrasts between the two women.

Instead of public service, however, it was increasingly personal concerns that dominated the Churchills’ lives. Their eldest daughter, Diana, married Conservative politician Duncan Sandys while Mary married diplomat Nicholas Soames (later Lord Soames), who would play a key role in concealing Churchill’s incapacity following a stroke in 1953. Pamela and Randolph formally ended their marriage while the war was still on, and she subsequently began an affair with the married Murrow. When Murrow abandoned her, she began a series of affairs with high profile and wealthy men that would eventually take her back into the arms of Harriman. Randolph, for his part, married again in 1948 but his drinking and boorish behaviour made him increasingly intolerable. Already having been through one unsuccessful marriage that ended in 1945, Sarah was pursued by former American ambassador Gil Winant but, hesitating to marry again, she rejected his advances (and his offer to leave his wife). Devastated by romantic rejection and undoubtedly also the recent end of his diplomatic career, Winant shot himself in 1947. Her next husband, Antony Beauchamp, quickly turned his attentions to other women and in 1957 he too committed suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. Sarah increasingly dealt with the world by turning to drink (pp. 332, 339).

By the mid-1950s, Winston was in poor health. In 1951 he was re-elected Prime Minister after the Labour government called an ill-advised election but was clearly a shadow of his former self. In 1953 he suffered a stroke and was essentially incapacitated, though a close a close circle of advisers concealed the extent of his
illness from the nation and even most of the cabinet itself. Facing failing health, he resigned as prime minister in 1955 and in 1963 he left his seat in the House of Commons. The same year, Clementine was admitted to hospital for depression. It was there that she learned that her daughter Diana had committed suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills following her divorce from Duncan Sandys and his subsequent embroilment in a much-publicised sex scandal (p. 351). Neither parent was well enough to attend her funeral, but did manage to attend a later memorial service.

In early 1965, Winston suffered another stroke and died on 24 January. Clementine never slept in their former home of Chartwell again (p. 354). Purnell has little to say about the 13 years she spent as a widow, except to say that she lived in London and enjoyed ‘visiting theatres and galleries’ (p. 357). Randolph died of a heart attack in 1968, undoubtedly brought on by his alcoholism. In 1971, she sent flowers to Pamela when it was announced that she was finally engaged to Harriman, the man she had first gone to bed with at least in part to gather information useful for her country (p. 357). In December 1977, Clementine suffered a heart attack and died at the age of 92. Her daughter Sarah would die just five years later after being widowed by her third husband after only a year of marriage.

Purnell concludes her account on a balanced note by acknowledging her subject’s flaws: ‘not least her shortcomings as a mother and perhaps a dash of hypochondria’ (p. 359). Whether it would be appropriate to include in this first category her attitude toward her daughter-in-law’s adultery is open to debate, but it is hard to escape the conclusion that Clementine’s affections toward Pamela were not to some extent motivated by her dislike of her son. Indeed, all of the Churchill children were deeply troubled, with the exception of Mary, and alcohol was the usual means they chose to deal with the vagaries of life. How much of this can be attributed to the coldness of their mother and the ambitions of their father when they were young is impossible to say.

In the final reckoning, Purnell writes that Clementine was the rock upon which Winston’s achievements had been built. ‘Without her by his side sharing the burden, it is difficult if not impossible to imagine him becoming the single-minded giant who led Britain, against almost impossible odds, to victory over tyranny,’ she writes on the final page (p. 360). It is difficult to argue with Purnell’s conclusions about Clementine’s significance to her husband throughout his turbulent career. Indeed, it is easy to imagine Churchill wrecking his political ship upon the rocks of ambition and arrogance at many points before 1940.

While occasionally falling prey to a slightly tabloid-esque tone (periodic references to Clementine’s sartorial choices, for instance) and a few asides that seem difficult to concretely establish – Purnell speculates that both Winston and Clementine were ‘almost certainly’ virgins on their wedding night, despite him being nearly 34 – this book is well researched and provides important new information about the life of the person who was arguably Churchill’s most important adviser and certainly his longest (p. 39). With the increasing availability of archival materials relating to the subsequent generation of Churchills (particularly Pamela, who was eventually appointed United States ambassador to France at the same time her son was sitting in parliament) hopefully this book will be among the first of a new generation of Churchill scholarship.

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