ideological contest between communism and capitalism, as advanced by the report, would provide an agreeable context for global economic colonisation over the succeeding decades. No doubt the Soviet Union had spies in Australia and had in the leadership of the Communist Party of Australia a willing servant. But the suppression of a political party, the labour movement and proponents of the ideology of communism was blatantly anti-democratic, albeit historically consistent. ASIO’s Cold War fanaticism, mirroring the personality traits of Spry, had profound consequences. It must have understood that its actions would help the Coalition at the polls. To attest, as Horner does, to its innocence in the events of 1954–55, which left the Labor ship listing, is to declare it utterly incompetent.

Spy Catchers cannot be viewed as benign history. Conveying a subject’s perspective is very different from embracing with the occasional slight criticism. This is a successful panegyric that netted some $45,000 in prize money. It was not until Horner wrote the Australian Dictionary of Biography entry on Spry that we learn of his alcoholism in the 1960s. It is nevertheless important for understanding ASIO in the time of Menzies. ‘Reading against the grain’ one can almost fashion gallows from its pages. Certainly, an expanded edition would include its thirteen steps. But the political ramifications of Spy Catchers are not lost on Horner: ‘ASIO’s officers were, and are, normal, dedicated Australians’. The book attracted positive reviews from former Labor leader Kim Beazley and former prime minister John Howard. We are told by George Brandis, the former Attorney-General, that Spry was ‘a very great Australian… who did more than any other o

Churchill


Clive Ponting had been a senior bureaucrat when he sensationally leaked various documents which resulted in the Belgrano affair. *Persona non grata* at court he took up the historian’s sword and earned notoriety as a ‘re-visionist’, seeing the dynamic nature of the discipline as it continuously responds to new evidence and new perspectives. His biography of Winston Churchill came at a time of sober reflection on the great man.

In the intoxicating atmosphere of nostalgia at present it is easy to forget the person who was Churchill. Films depicting the man or his actions draw heavily from his autobiographical work. But there is nothing harmless in offering a fading actor a chance at career redemption by portraying the Churchillian caricature, inspiring a nation with momentous speeches and refusing to negotiate peace. The audience does not see the man who killed enemy combatants ‘in cold blood’ with expanding bullets (dumdum) or who arrogantly and incompetently sent many thousands to their deaths. Ponting shows that the Battle of Britain was not won by inspired oratory – the vast majority of people having not heard Churchill’s speeches until after the war – but by the preparatory actions of the Baldwin and Chamberlain governments. But Churchill’s role was transformative in a personal sense: his doctor noted the sudden wartime transformation of his sexagenarian patient into a lisping, hunched, bulldog.

Ponting’s deeply researched account demonstrates that Churchill’s long career was professionally successful but disastrous for most others. Suffering from an unsubstantiated narcissism, he was an elitist who thought women, workers and non-Anglo Saxons genetically deficient. He held a lifelong distain for democracy, explaining his admiration for fascism; in the 1930s he believed it would replace liberalism as the organising principle of civilised society. He frequently – and quite ironically – advocated for the usurpation of the rule of law and did so whenever he was in power. His obsession was the preservation and resurrection of the aristocracy, which faced a global conspiracy against it (so he believed). As contemporaries observed, his fascism and rigid belief in the centralised power of the British Empire – even in the case of white-dominated colonies – were entirely complementary.

So entitled did Churchill feel he always reached for the vinegar, not the honey. He orchestrated the creation of a brutal arsenal of chemical weapons, which he utilised, advocated the continuance of war in Europe to defeat the Bolsheviks after the First World War and Soviets after the second, and generally sought to violently supress the working class. As Chancellor of the Exchequer he shifted wealth to the moneyed classes and ensured that most Britishers entered the Great Depression battered by austerity. Untold carnage was caused, especially if you consider that austerity in the United Kingdom, 2010–2014, resulted in the deaths of some 120 thousand people.
He had no compassion for indigenous peoples, believing no wrong came from a ‘stronger’ and ‘higher grade race’ seizing land in Australian and North America.

Churchill’s numerous blunders also contradict his cultivated image as master strategist. As Ponting shows, it was Churchill who arranged the Dardanelles campaign, who gutted Britain of armaments in the 1920s, who stressed the utter improbability of the Japanese threat, who advocated the Singapore strategy, who antagonised Irish republicans with the Black and Tans, and B-Specials, who contemplated war with the United States, who broadly supported European fascism until 1938 (and advocated appeasement), who advocated the Supermarine Spitfire, Hawker Hurricane, radar, submarine, and tank, who botched the Norway campaign (which resulted in Chamberlain’s political demise), who advocated fighting the USSR as well as Nazi Germany, who provoked the Blitz, who gave the US intelligence and technical secrets simply to curry favour, and who was quickly relegated by allied command because of his abysmal record.

Yet, in domestic politics he was master craftsman. His famous pre-war speeches on the threat posed by Nazi Germany were opportunistic. Churchill followed the Baldwin government’s lead on rearmament but cunningly used leaked intelligence reports in Parliament, knowing that an official response could not be made to contradict his exaggerated claims. He became prime minister during the war when he dexterously assassinated the then popular Neville Chamberlain; the man he seconded for the leadership in 1937. His defining achievement was the publication of his history of the war, which successfully resurrected his career, his place in history, and the allure of the British Empire despite its demise at the hands of the US.

Relativists would contend that Churchill was a man of his time. Yet, even he was acutely aware of the unpopularity of his elitist, sexist, barbaric and racist views. He went to great lengths throughout his career to couch or bury those views, especially with his imaginative autobiographical works (some of which were written by ghost-writers). His own colleagues frequently registered their displeasure and disgust at his politics. And he was adept at self-contradiction, thus enabling generations of biographers to cast him as substantially less grotesque.

The private lives of the later Churchills was certainly Victorian in its hypocrisy. Accused of homosexuality by the father of his friend he quickly had the accusation quashed. His wife, Clementine, probably had numerous affairs, as did his parents; his mother, Jennie, is said to have carried on with the future Edward VII while his father, Randolph Senior, died of syphilis before he was fifty. The relationship between Winston and Clementine was distant; they holidayed separately and mostly lived apart. They did not raise their children and showed little care for them, especially a three-year-old daughter who died of a throat infection while they holidayed (separately). Another daughter, the late Lady Mary Soames, lived in her nanny’s cottage. Both Winston and Clementine, whose relationship is also celebrated in film, suffered from lifelong depression. On the evidence, they did little, if anything, to assist each other.

Churchill is a hero to many influential Australian politicians, including John Howard, Paul Keating, Tony Abbott, and Kim Beazley. To be fair, these people probably admire the Churchill that Churchill winnowed from his own imagination. Yet, even the real Churchill seems to have its proponents. Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, who unashamedly models himself on the great bulldog, leaves a trail of miscalculation, misinformation and calamity on his path to personal glory.

Ponting shattered the Churchill illusion for his readers leaving them little to piece together, just marble shards on the floor of his looted temple. This biographical tome is an historical masterpiece and essential reading for any democrat.


Reviewer: C J Coventry, PhD candidate, CRCAH, Federation University Australia.