

# Piers Brendon

Born 1940. Author and academic.

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# 1. Introduction

*The following introduction was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Wikipedia website at [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org).*

Piers Brendon read history at Cambridge and took a PhD on the subject of “Hurrell Froude and the Oxford Movement”. This was published in 1974 and since then he has written over a dozen further books. From 1965 to 1978, he was lecturer in history, then principal lecturer and head of department, at what is now Anglia Ruskin University. Piers Brendon is a former Keeper of the Churchill Archives Centre and an emeritus Fellow of Churchill College.

Among his books are biographies of Churchill and Eisenhower, general histories of the 1930s and of the British Empire, studies of organisations such as Thomas Cook and the Royal Automobile Club, and collections of essays about eminent Edwardians and (modern) Elizabethans. His latest book is a brief biography of Edward VIII in the Penguin Monarchs series. Brendon has written widely for the British and American press. He has done much work for television, in front of the camera and behind it, notably on such documentaries as *The Churchills* and *The Windsors*, which was nominated for a Royal Television Society Award. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

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## 2. The Churchill Archives Centre



*The Churchill Archives Centre at Churchill College Cambridge.*

*From 1995 to 2001 Piers Brendon was Keeper of the Churchill Archives Centre at Churchill College Cambridge. The following description of the collections at the Centre was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of Churchill College at [www.chu.cam.ac.uk](http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk).*

*The Churchill Archives Centre contains a wide range of documents by more than 570 political, military and scientific luminary figures from the Churchill era and beyond. Some of the main collections are described below.*

### **The Churchill Papers**

The Churchill Papers consist of the original documents sent, received or composed by Sir Winston Churchill during the course of his long and active life. In 2013 the collection was recognised by UNESCO, as part of its Memory of the World Programme, highlighting its particular importance to the heritage of Britain.

The collection includes some 3000 boxes of letters and documents ranging from his first childhood letters to his final writings. They include his personal correspondence with friends and family, and his official exchanges with kings, presidents, politicians and military leaders. Some of the most memorable phrases of the twentieth-century are preserved in his own drafts and speaking notes for the famous wartime speeches. The Churchill Papers comprise an estimated 1 million individual documents. In

April 1995 grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the John Paul Getty Foundation purchased the Churchill Papers for the nation.

### **The Thatcher Papers**

The collection of papers of Baroness Thatcher deposited at Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, is among the largest and most significant of late twentieth century political archives.

The archive contains over 1 million documents in nearly three thousand archive boxes currently occupying around 300 metres of shelving. The papers date from Margaret Thatcher's childhood to the end of her life, and include tens of thousands of photographs, as well as a vast collection of press cuttings, and many audio and video tapes of public and private events. Thatcher never kept a diary, but the archive includes rich details of her role in important domestic and world events.

### **The British Diplomatic Oral History Programme (BDOHP)**

The British Diplomatic Oral History Programme creates a valuable new body of research material for the study of British diplomatic history. It was established in 1995 by Malcolm McBain, a retired Diplomatic Service officer, with the approval and co-operation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The BDOHP interviews former diplomats or other officials who have played a significant role in events bearing on international relations.

This material, which is being preserved and conserved at the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge, offers unparalleled insights into how British diplomats function and what really happened at crucial moments in their careers. It affords a unique account of important, and often unrecorded, events in international relations. It is increasingly recognised as a source of raw material by scholars, writers, journalists and researchers.

### **The Mitrokhin Papers**

KGB files from the famous Mitrokhin Archive — described by the FBI as "the most complete and extensive intelligence ever received from any source" — are now open for consultation at the Churchill Archives Centre.

From 1972 to 1984, Major Vasiliy Mitrokhin was a senior archivist in the KGB's foreign intelligence archive – with unlimited access to hundreds of thousands of files from a global network of spies and intelligence gathering operations. At the same time, having grown disillusioned with the brutal oppression of the Soviet regime, he was taking secret handwritten notes of the material and smuggling them out of the building each evening. In 1992, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he, his family and his archive were exfiltrated by the UK's Secret Intelligence Service.

Now, Mitrokhin's files are open at the Churchill Archives Centre, where they sit alongside the personal papers of Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. In 2014, at the time of their opening, Professor Christopher Andrew, the only historian hitherto allowed access to the archive, and author of two global bestsellers with Mitrokhin, said: "There are only two places in the world where you'll find material like this. One is the KBG archive – which is not open and very difficult to get into – and the other is here at Churchill College where Mitrokhin's own typescript notes are today being opened for all the world to see".

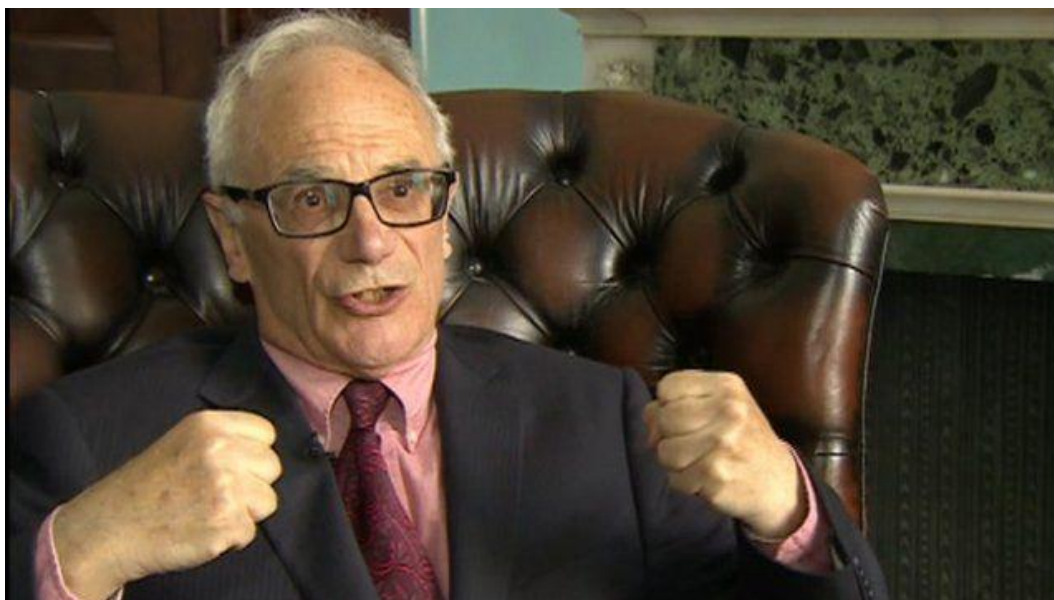


*Churchill College Cambridge.*

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### 3. Interview on De Gaulle and Churchill

*The following interview was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the podcasts website of Prospect magazine. The interview was by Jay Elwes and was produced in November 2018.*



#### **Britain's Churchill Problem, with Piers Brendon.**

*Jay Elwes: I'm here with Piers Brendon, the Cambridge historian. Hello Piers, and welcome to the Prospect podcast. You wrote a fantastic piece for us earlier in the year all about Charles de Gaulle. There was a big biography that came out about him. Why is it that a figure like de Gaulle is so important to us now?*

Piers Brendon: Well, I think that great men have a kind of gravitational pull on history. De Gaulle saw himself as a great historical figure in the tradition of Charlemagne, Joan of Arc, Louis XIV, and Napoleon. He saw himself as under the aegis of history. He had an impact partly because he had this great idea of himself. And partly because of his own extraordinary intransigence. His finest hour, just like Churchill's, was in the summer of 1940.

He represented the resistance of France. He saved the soul of the nation, it was said. That stood him in incredibly good stead for the rest of his career. This was the high point of his life. Looking backwards and looking forwards, people have to take into account de Gaulle. So Macron for example, today, is looking back to de Gaulle. He is inflating the majesty of the president. The president being of course the head of the state of the Fifth Republic which de Gaulle himself created.

So I think you can say that although it's not fashionable, indeed it's nonsense, to talk about history being the biography of great men, nevertheless great men have a great impact on history and de Gaulle was no different from them.



*His impact, as you set out in your review, but also as Julian Jackson set out the book itself – A Certain Idea of France – is one of somebody who almost wilfully set out to be a symbol. Is that a fair way of putting it?*

I think he had always been a symbol. He regarded himself as a symbol. I mean his name, which actually means 'the wall' is derived from the Flemish. It has nothing to do with de being noble or Gaulle being France. But he always had this idea of himself. When he was at St. Cyr, his military school, one of the instructors said, well he's incredibly intelligent, he's an absolutely brilliant figure, but he regards himself as a king in exile. And this was a young man, admittedly taller than everyone else. Having this extraordinarily inflated idea of his destiny.

De Gaulle I think always saw himself as a man of destiny. As indeed did Churchill. This is the extraordinary thing. Both men, from a very very early age, convinced others as well as themselves that they were men of destiny, that they were going to rule their country and that they were going to be saviours. And both men wrote histories of their own time which turned out to be redemptive dramas in which they were the saviour and the hero. This natural tendency towards self-aggrandisement that de Gaulle showed was somewhat bound up by his being extraordinarily tall, by having no father and having an awkward manner. He also had rather startling halitosis! So he's a rather odd agglomeration of characteristics.

*He did rub people up the wrong way, especially the Americans?*

Oh, absolutely. During the war he said that only through intransigence could he maintain France's greatness and grandeur. He started talking about himself in the third person. He used the royal we, just like Louis XIV. He said 'L'etat c'est moi' – I am the state. From a very early age he was extraordinarily rude, prickly. He went in for the most menacing forms of silence. He said 'a great leader is silent'. Quite the opposite to Churchill, of course, who thought that a great leader was extremely voluble!

Churchill was driven mad by him. He said in his wonderful French 'if you get in my way I'm going to get rid of you'. At one point he said that 'de Gaulle must be taken back to Algiers, in chains if necessary'. It was an extraordinary relationship. Yet Churchill admired him, because he said: 'This man behaves like Stalin with two hundred divisions behind him, and yet he has nothing. He relies entirely on our goodwill, and he doesn't give a damn'.

It's funny that that was the impression that some of the American senior men had of de Gaulle, and why I think Roosevelt never trusted him. He suspected that de Gaulle had dictatorial intentions. Roosevelt described him as an apprentice dictator, and other people had the same feeling about him. Adenauer, later on, said he was a bit Fuhrer like. And a lot of people felt it was not just Napoleon that he resembled, but Mussolini, even possibly Hitler as well. Because he was so ruthlessly determined to get his own way. And God he was ruthless. He didn't spare people, and he employed as President a man called Maurice Papon who had served in the Vichy regime and had been responsible for the deportation of Jews to Germany.

De Gaulle was a very unbending character. An adamant, flint-like character. And that of course was the impression he liked to give. But at the same time he was a master politician. This is the interesting thing about Julian Jackson's book and the very clever thing. De Gaulle presented this image of a latter day Louis XIV, yet it turns out he was an extremely skilful party politician. He presented himself as the national hero, the national saviour, the embodiment of the nation. But actually he was a dedicated party politician with a stiletto in his sock.

*And was he able to bring along the left after 1945. The left that had been so prominent in the resistance movement that de Gaulle himself had spear-headed?*

After 1945, when he was briefly in charge of France, he tried to unify France. And the way he did that was to play down the sins of Vichy and played down the achievements of the resistance. And that is understandable, because the spine of the resistance had been communist. And de Gaulle wanted to re-create the state. He had an almost mystical view of the importance of the state, and he wanted to undermine the legitimacy of the resistance and to reconcile with Vichy. He described



Vichy as just a bunch of scoundrels. He didn't attach to Vichy the blame they deserved to have attached to it because Vichy had been collaborating with Hitler all through the war.

*How can we fit someone like Charles de Gaulle and his incredible legacy into current European politics? He seems so far removed from the type of leaders that we have now.*

In some ways, of course, there was a kind of Trump-like element about de Gaulle. He caused terrific upsets by criticising the United Nations as a means of American power. He went to Canada and he said 'Vive le Quebec Libre!'. He caused a great deal of trouble. And of course he kept Britain out of the Common Market. So he constantly asserted himself as President on the world stage because that corresponded to the grandeur of France, of which he was the champion. So you could say that like Trump he was constantly on display. He was manifesting France First, just as Trump is manifesting America First. He was advertising the greatness of France, because of course it had been undermined. And he said, interestingly, about France's independent nuclear deterrent, that it was a resurrection. It was something that guaranteed France's future role on the world stage.

I think this is something that he had in common with Churchill. He couldn't bear the thought that France would become simply another European power.

Churchill is a figure who is re-purposed and brought out into British politics in all sorts of ways. Most recently in a new book by Andrew Roberts, which you recently reviewed. What do you think when you see Churchill popping up repeatedly like this? Boris Johnson wrote a book about him. Last summer you reviewed a series of films about Churchill, one of which you advised upon. What do you make of Churchill as this totem?

Well it's very interesting really. I think that if you look at the twentieth century, until 1940 Britain looked back to the first day of the Somme as its key moment. The moment when we suffered. And the result of the First World War was extremely equivocal. After 1940 we looked back to our finest hour, the hour when Churchill resisted Hitler – Britain alone. Of course it wasn't quite along because of the Empire. Britain resisting Hitler and this picture of Britain has I think been something which we have cherished ever since. It's our moment of glory.

The problem is that in 1940 we were indeed a super power. The American army was about the size of the Turkish army. Hitler was of course a major power. But we had the greatest navy in the world. We had dominions all around the world which came to our aid. What has happened since then is that we have become diminished. The old cliché about losing an empire

and not finding a role has come true. It's a truth. So what do we do? We do what the French are doing now; they are looking back to the glory days of de Gaulle and the fact that he was the embodiment of the glory of France.

Don't forget, glory is a key thing. Over the gateway of Versailles is the legend A Toutes Les Gloires de la France. It was embodied in Louis XIV, in Napoleon, and later in de Gaulle. And I think our glory, the British glory, is embodied in the resistance we put up, with Churchill's sublime leadership expressed the extraordinary eloquence that he could command, and we look back to that.

The problem about that is that the past is distorting our present, because we are now a minor power. We are a European power, trying to assert ourselves in Brexit to regain the kind of independence that we had then. It all goes back to our nostalgia for that extraordinary moment in history where we were standing up to one of the greatest evils that the world has ever seen, and spilled our blood in this cause.

*It's difficult to see that national myth, of finest hour and so on, ever being replaced by anything else, isn't it?*

I think it is. It has disappeared. But politicians are constantly talking about it. Douglas Hurd coined the phrase about 'boxing above our weight'. That we are diminished in certain respects, but we are a world leader. And constantly you have Mrs. May and others talking about world leadership. And Boris Johnson was a good example of that. His deplorable book about Churchill, which is full of inaccuracies.

*Did you read it?*

Oh yes. Full of inaccuracies, and written in the style of the Beano. It was designed, I think, not to get to grips with Churchill but to promote him as the replacement for Churchill. He sees himself in a sort of Churchillian mould. He does have a certain command of rhetoric – nothing like Churchill's – but that's what we go back to. Again and again I think you can see it. And it's not just Britain. Churchill's bust goes in and out of the Oval office, dependent on the particular propensities of the President.

George W. Bush, for example, invoked Churchill as the person who refused to appease Germany in the 1930s. And he said we are not going to appease Saddam Hussein today. It was a preposterous notion really, because Saddam Hussein was not a threat to America in the way that Hitler was a threat to the western world. And Bush was certainly no Churchill – anything but it. It also mis-represented Churchill, because Churchill was the champion anti-appeaser. That is certainly true during the 1930s. But later on what did he want to do. He wanted to come to some sort of rapprochement with Soviet Russia during the 1950s. And in 1950 Churchill himself said to parliament appeasement may be good or bad depending on

the circumstances. Appeasement from weakness, yes bad. But appeasement from strength, and because you want to conciliate your opponents and work out a *modus vivendi*, that's good.



*Eisenhower and Khrushchev at the 1955 Geneva summit.*

By that time the Americans had so absorbed the lesson of the disgrace of Munich that when Eisenhower came back from the Geneva summit Nixon instructed everybody on the tarmac that, despite the fact it was raining, they were not to hold umbrellas when they greeted the President on his return from talking to the Russians because that might remind people of Chamberlain and the disgraceful appeasement of 1938 at Munich.

So I think Churchill has had a global impact, and in some ways de Gaulle has too, by the Trump example.

You were describing a lot of distortions that are caused by history. By partly remember invocations of past glories, and so on. Part of your work involves being an educator and writing books and giving lectures. Is there any way from that perspective that you can see the beginning of any adjustment to these much abused elements of our history, so that we can see things a bit more straight?

That's a very interesting question. Of course history is the answer. I mean looking at it straight is the answer. The trouble is that too many books exaggerate the glories of the past. They don't look at history plain. And I think that the key to the answer is examining our history in an objective way.

It took France, for example, an awfully long time to come to terms with the horrors of collaboration. I mean not until 1968 was I generally

acknowledged that France had deported Jews. It has taken even longer for the full horrors of the Vichy regime to come out into the open. And that's because we tend to bury our past. We don't look at it in an objective and detached kind of way. And we don't apply to it the proper canons. We criticise Turkey, for example, over denying the Armenian massacres. We criticise Japan for refusing to come to terms with its own history.

*And in your book *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* you set out, in really quite difficult to read detail, some of the really appalling incidents in British post-colonial history. I suppose you could call it our disengagement from various parts of the globe that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A lot of that does not appear on any British history syllabus. Certainly not up to eighteen. That strikes me perhaps as our lacuna.*

Yes, I think this is right. If you look at the kind of books that were written. Jan Morris is a case in point. A wonderful three volume celebration of the Empire. And these books are still emerging, giving an account of the Empire which is certainly rose-tinted. I think we've got to come to terms with it. A book was written, which I don't agree with, called Britain's Gulag, which was all to do with our behaviour as we disengaged from Kenya. I think that was wrong, I don't think it compared with the Gulag. On the other hand what it did throw up, and I did some original research on this, is that we behaved in the most brutal fashion. As of course the French did in Algeria. De-colonisation is often an extremely painful process.

I think we should come to terms with that. And we should come to terms with the fact that our Empire was designed to enhance Britain's power and wealth, and often we used extraordinarily ruthless measures to achieve that object. And this is something which I got a lot of stick for. For example Jan Morris reviewed my book and said it was a wonderful book but had a fatal flaw, that I was too critical of the Empire.

*Another thing that you have been involved in in recent years, which I referred to in passing earlier, is the spate of films that came out about Churchill. You reviewed, as I said, several of them for Prospect last summer. But you advised on the *Oldman* film, didn't you?*

Yes, I was called in to talk to the cast before the film was made. Which I was very interested to do. I think I got more out of it than they did. But I did give them a talk. And I did talk to individual members of the cast about how to portray various figures in it. And that was a very interesting experience. But of course one's got to remember that this film is a film. It is not a historical documentary. It doesn't pretend to be that, and it contains episodes which are more or less impossible. For example Churchill going down into the tube and talking to a whole lot of people about what he should do.

*As a historian of Churchill, do you think there is a role for fictionalised depictions of the spirit of an era? Or is that taking us down the rose-tinted glasses path that you think is a bit dangerous?*

I think there is a role for historical fiction and historical films. But I don't think one should every allow it to supersede a very careful assessment of the realities of the situation. The trouble with most of these films is that they tended to glamorise war, and to glamorise our own role in it. And it was very interesting to see that after the war we had all these stiff upper lipped Englishmen going through the motions. And did give a fundamental mis-representation of what the war had been about. Actually in some respects it was really quite realistic. When they made films about Dunkirk and Arnhem they used some of the people who had been there, and some of the aircraft were re-cycled to take part in the film. To that extent they were realistic, but the general picture that was given was a picture of a glamorised war rather than a realist war.

*And finally, Piers, the distorted historical view that is still quite popular in Britain, that has been hanging over a lot of what we have discussed here. How much of that has, do you think, driven our attitude towards Europe, towards Brexit, and towards the idea that Britain can be a member of the European team and not exceptionally mid-Atlantic standing alone?*



*Churchill delivering his 1946 Zurich speech on Europe.*

Churchill's attitude towards Europe was a very peculiar one. He extolled Europe. And in his 1946 Zurich speech he made one of the most eloquent appeals for a United States of Europe. Was Britain to be a member of that

United States of Europe? Well, to some extent. We don't know quite where he stood. He certainly didn't want a federal Europe, but he did believe in the worth of Europe as a cultural, economic and military entity standing between America and Russia. Having an importance as a sort of balancing factor. He thought Britain – and he told de Gaulle this, which rankled with de Gaulle for the rest of his life – should at the end favour the Atlantic alliance. We should look overseas to America. We should look to the English speaking peoples. And not to Europe.

Boris Johnson would like to think that Churchill would have been a card-carrying Brexiteer in his own image. My own feeling is that Churchill was a great leader. And he said himself that great leaders do not necessarily have their ear close to public opinion. He didn't believe in the French dictum – I am their leader I must follow them. He believed in leading and taking a strong stand. And I think that if he were around – and this is my personal view and I can't prove it – he would probably favour something that was in the national interest, which I take to be being an integral member of the European community.

That's a controversial view, and it's unprovable. But I think that is what Churchill, as a great patriot, would probably say. And that is the view that his grandson Nicholas Soames takes of him.

*Piers Brendon, thank you very much indeed.*

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## 4. Article on the Moral Audit of the British Empire

*The following article by Piers Brendon was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Open Democracy website at [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net). It was published in November 2007. It was first published in October 2007 in *History Today*.*

The moral balance-sheet of the British empire is a chaotic mixture of black and red. So it is understandable that people today, trying to evaluate this momentous episode in what patriotic narratives refer to as "our island story", are confused. The New Labour government that came to power in 1997 is a case in point. After a trip to east Africa in 2005, Britain's then chancellor (now prime minister) Gordon Brown said that "the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over". Indeed, he asserted, the country should be proud of the empire. By contrast, Brown's predecessor as prime minister Tony Blair (who was still in office when the bicentenary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807 was marked) expressed "deep sorrow" for this imperial transgression.

Similar contradictions prevail in the media. The BBC's transmission of such programmes as *This Sceptred Isle* (on Radio 4), and *Empire's Children* (on Channel 4), promotes imperial nostalgia for a humane and benign Greater Britain, which print critics are apt to denounce as a bloodstained tyranny.

Yet the evidence is there to be assessed. True, just as a financial audit of empire cannot compute the profits that might have been made if Britain had invested at home (as Adam Smith wanted) instead of abroad, a moral audit cannot calculate what benefits might have accrued to India, say, if no colonial occupation had taken place. All the same, it is not too early - 250 years after the battle of Plassey laid the foundation of the Raj, 150 years after the Indian mutiny, sixty years after India's independence, as well as half a century after the first sub-Saharan African colony (Ghana) got self-government and a decade after the handover of Britain's last major overseas territory, Hong Kong - to set the empire's obvious pluses against its palpable minuses. How does it weigh up from the ethical point of view?

### **The white gleam**

On the credit side, first of all, the British empire was a liberal empire. It was founded on principles classically enunciated by Edmund Burke, who maintained that colonial government was a trust. It should to be exercised for the benefit of subject peoples, who would eventually attain their natural right to self-rule. As Burke famously declared: "The British Empire must be governed on a plan of freedom, for it will be governed by no other."

More or less sincerely, Britons reiterated this claim over the next two centuries. The (Conservative) Primrose League took as its motto, Imperium et Libertas. In 1921, Lloyd George told the imperial conference that the British empire was unique because "Liberty is its binding principle." Whitehall mandarins said that the evolution of empire into commonwealth after the second world war completed the process whereby colonial territories came to stand on their own feet.

It is not surprising that subject peoples seldom accepted that the empire aimed at their advancement. Yet even when the mother country spoke in offensive terms - inhabitants of white dominions as well as coloured colonies were deemed "children" being nurtured for the freedoms and responsibilities of maturity - she frequently felt obliged to put her principles into practice. In most cases, British empire-builders took their civilising mission seriously.

Often they saw this as a matter of subduing "barbarism" and "savagery". Thus in India they did their best to eradicate thuggee and suttee, as General Sir Charles Napier rejected cultural relativism and promised to act according to the custom of his own country: "when men burn women alive we hang them." In Africa they endeavoured to put down slavery, Christian missionaries following the example of David Livingstone, who was said to have sacrificed his life "to heal this open sore of the world". In New Zealand they suppressed cannibalism and the traffic in tattooed Maori heads - traders had taken to bidding for them when they were still attached to shoulders. In Hong Kong they tried to stop foot-binding and infanticide.

Bearers of the "white man's burden" also laboured to promote the positive welfare of their charges. At the top, for example, Lord Curzon (right) worked indefatigably as viceroy to give India measures of justice, reform and social improvement. Taking to government (to paraphrase the Times) as other men take to drink, he aspired to give India the best administration it had ever had. He fostered commerce, expanded communications, developed irrigation, relieved famine, encouraged education, restored monuments, strengthened defence and promoted efficiency. He even ordered the removal of pigeon droppings from Calcutta's public library. Furthermore, Curzon resisted Britain's "Shylock" exploitation of India, writing to Whitehall as though he were the ruler of a foreign power.





Similarly, at the bottom of the empire's administrative ladder, many British officials evinced a remarkable propensity to favour their black or brown charges at the expense of their white overlords. The unpublished memoir of an Irish lawyer, Manus Nunan, who was usually scathing about the English, contains nothing but praise for the district officers he met in Nigeria during the 1950s: "Their concern for the native people they governed was wonderful."

E. D. Morel (1873-1924), that scourge of imperial wrongdoing, made the same point: such civil servants were "strong in their sense of justice, keen in their sense of right, firm in their sense of duty." They were honest, brave, responsible and, above all, industrious.

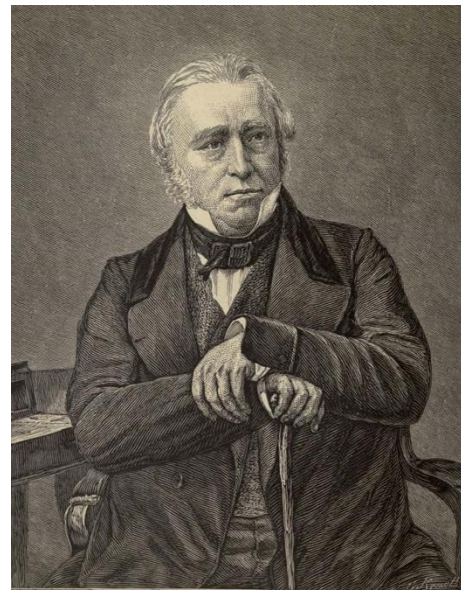
The district officer, a model of omnicompetence, could hardly avoid dedication to his work. He collected taxes, presided in court, supervised the police, oversaw public works, advanced agriculture, promoted health, inspected schools, fostered sport, encouraged Boy Scouts, arbitrated in disputes and fulfilled endless social functions. Often he and his ilk were thin on the ground. Leonard Woolf, who in the first decade of the 20th century supervised Ceylon's huge pearl fisheries with a couple of other officers armed with walking-sticks, observed that the country was "the exact opposite of a 'police state'." Usually, imperial civil servants had to operate on a shoestring. Yet in prosperous colonies such as Malaya, they took direct action, every Resident being, as one official put it, "a Socialist in his own state." They constructed roads and railways. They erected buildings and created enterprises, notably the tin-smelting industry. They invested in education, sanitation, irrigation and power generation.

Even George Orwell, who had seen colonial dirty work at close quarters in Burma in the 1920s, acknowledged that the British empire was much better than any other. It was vastly superior, in moral terms, to the French, German, Portuguese and Dutch empires. And it bore no resemblance to the "vampire empire" created by King Leopold of the Belgians in the Congo, which was responsible for perhaps 10 million deaths, let alone to the genocidal Nazi empire or to Japan's vicious and corrupt "greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere".

Finally, nothing better became the British empire than its dissolution. Facing adverse circumstances almost everywhere after the second world war, the British lived up to their magnanimous professions. They fulfilled their duty as trustees, giving their coloured colonies the autonomy (mostly within the multi-racial commonwealth) long enjoyed by the white dominions. The process was by no means free of trouble and bloodshed - in Malaya, Palestine, Kenya, Cyprus, Suez, Aden and elsewhere. The partition of India caused horrifying convulsion and carnage. And there was a nasty epilogue in Rhodesia and the Falklands. But there was nothing to compare

with the bitter wars that the French fought before extricating themselves from Vietnam and Algeria. Thanks to pragmatic policies formulated in London, the empire experienced what Ronald Hyam (in *Britain's Declining Empire*) called "a quiet and easy death".

Macaulay (right) had famously reckoned that the passing away of the imperial sceptre would be "the proudest day in English history". For he hoped his compatriots would leave behind an empire that was immune to decay, "the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws". Many pundits quoted him when praising or appraising the achievements of the empire. Wherever the map was painted red, Britain had disseminated its culture, language and technology, its ideals of democracy, good governance and free speech, its fondness for sport and fair play,



its enlightened values and Christian civilisation. According to Allan Massie, writing after the handover of Hong Kong, the British empire had been "a force for good unrivalled in the modern world". Western Europe lived on the legacy of Rome, he said, and "our Empire leaves at least as rich a legacy to the whole world."

### **The red stream**

What of the debit side? The fact is that the phrase *Imperium et Libertas* was a contradiction in terms. What it meant in a Roman mouth, as William Gladstone said, was "Liberty for ourselves, Empire over the rest of mankind." In the British mouth "liberty" was part of the insufferable cant used to conceal the brutal realities of imperialism. The empire was "a despotism with theft as its final object", as George Orwell said, and the pukka sahib's code was slimy humbug.

Sometimes the hypocrisy was scarcely conscious, noted the critic J. A. Hobson in the early years of the 20th century; it was what Plato had termed "the lie in the soul", the lie that does not know it's a lie. Lord Salisbury himself exposed the truth. "If our ancestors had cared for the rights of other people", he observed, "the British empire would not have been made." Its purpose was not to spread sweetness and light but to increase Britain's wealth and power. Naturally its coercive and exploitative nature must be disguised. Bamboozle was better than bamboo, he considered, and "as India must be bled, the bleeding should be done judiciously."

Actually, from the time that Britain had begun to transform its commercial dominance into political ascendancy, India was bled white. During the

1760s Bengal was so squeezed that the province, which the Mughals had called "the paradise of earth", became an abyss of torment. It was ravaged by war, pestilence and famine. A third of the population died of hunger, some driven to cannibalism. Although relief efforts were made, British "bullies, cheats and swindlers" continued to prey on the carcass of Bengal and some profiteered in hoarded grain. Meanwhile Indian revenues (which amounted to perhaps a billion pounds sterling between Plassey in 1757 and Waterloo in 1815) spelled the redemption of Britain, according to the Earl of Chatham. They were "a kind of gift from heaven".

The history of the Raj was punctuated by further famines, which caused tens of millions of deaths. These were not, as Mike Davis claims, colonial "holocausts". But the British failed lamentably in India, as they did in Ireland, in their duty of care. Condemning "humanitarian hysterics" during the worst Victorian famine, Lord Lytton said that the stoppage of his 1876 durbar "would be more disastrous to the permanent interests of the Empire than twenty famines". Despite pleas from the secretary of state for India Leo Amery during the terrible 1943-44 Bengal famine, Churchill refused to divert scarce shipping to Calcutta. He thought that "the starvation of anyway underfed Bengalis" was less serious than that of sturdy Greeks, particularly as Indians would go on breeding "like rabbits".

Such imperial callousness towards "lesser breeds" was commonplace, sometimes apparently condoned by a crude faith in survival of the fittest. As the author-explorer Winwood Reade wrote: "The law of murder is the law of growth." Of course, as TH Huxley said, evolution could not invalidate morality.

There could be no justification for the Tasmanian genocide or the slaughter of Australian aborigines. Yet as late as 1883 a colonial governor reported to Gladstone that refined Queenslanders talked approvingly "not only of the wholesale butchery (for the iniquity of that may sometimes be disguised from themselves) but of the individual murder of natives". Similarly, 20th-century British officials approved punitive operations in the southern Sudan even though they produced a crop of "regular Congo atrocities" amounting almost to genocide.

Resistance evidently licensed disproportionate retaliation. When crushing opposition in Ceylon in 1818, the British killed over 1% of the population. Thirty years later not a single European on the island perished in the only insurrection worthy of the name. But 200 alleged rebels were hanged or shot, and more were flogged or imprisoned. Governor Eyre's reprisals after the Morant Bay uprising in Jamaica followed the same pattern. In the wake of their disastrous retreat from Kabul in 1842, the British meted out enough retributive homicide to earn the perpetual enmity of Afghanistan. Burma,

Kenya and Iraq were subjugated with equal violence. After the Indian mutiny soldiers such as Garnet Wolseley did much to fulfil their vow to spill "barrels and barrels of the filth which flows in these niggers' veins for every drop of blood" they had shed. During the South African war the British allowed a sixth of the Boer population, mostly children, to die in concentration camps.

The catalogue of gross imperial wrongdoing is not hard to extend. It includes instances of exploitation such as the slave trade and the indentured labour traffic; cases of acquisitive aggression such the opium wars and the rape of Matabeleland; acts of vandalism such as the burning of the Chinese emperor's summer palace in Beijing and the destruction of the Mahdi's tomb at Omdurman; squalid fiascos such as the Jameson raid and the Suez invasion; crimes such as the use of dum-dum bullets and poison gas against "uncivilised tribes" (Churchill's phrase); massacres such as occurred at Amritsar in 1919, Batang Kali in Malaya in 1948 (the "British My Lai") and Hola camp in Kenya in 1959.

One should also list evils, such as torture and looting, which were endemic throughout the empire. Prize items of pillage, incidentally, were sent to Windsor Castle and, despite some restitution, most of them evidently remain in royal hands. Least among the treasures Queen Victoria received from Emperor Hsien-Feng's summer palace was a Pekinese dog, which she called Looty.

However, the indictment is not complete without mention of imperial sins of omission. Although some British officials were racist bullies - Bertrand Russell went so far as to call the empire "a cesspool for British moral refuse" - most were stultifyingly conventional. They had the vices of their virtues. Pig-sticking, gin-swimming public-school men, who held aloof from their charges or treated them with studied arrogance, they were dedicated to maintaining the imperial status quo. Nothing illustrates this better than Governor Richard Casey's shocked report on his province as the Raj neared its end:

"Bengal has, practically speaking, no irrigation or drainage, a medieval system of agriculture, no roads, no education, no cottage industries, completely inadequate hospitals ... and no adequate machinery to cope with distress. There are not even plans to make good these deficiencies."

Needless to say, much of the imperial legacy was failed states and internecine strife.

### **History's verdict**

All balance-sheets require interpretation; but it seems clear that, even according to its own lights, the British empire was in grave moral deficit. This should come as no surprise. Britain's conquests were necessarily

violent and its subsequent occupations were usually repressive. Imperial powers lack legitimacy and govern irresponsibly, relying on force, collaboration and propaganda. But no vindication, even that formulated by Burke, can eradicate the instinctive hostility to alien control. Libertas opposes imperium.

Edward Gibbon (right), himself wedded to liberty, went to the heart of the matter:

"A more unjust and absurd constitution cannot be devised than that which condemns the natives of a country to perpetual servitude, under the arbitrary dominion of strangers."

Gibbon's admonitions are for the ages, but they seem peculiarly pertinent at a time when American and British leaders have fatally succumbed to the lure of neo-imperial adventure. The first sentence he ever published, in his *Essay on the Study of Literature* (1761), epitomised his immortal work:

"The history of empires is the history of human misery."

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## 5. Article on The Monarchy

*The following was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Guardian at [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com). It was written by Piers Brendon and was published in December 2000.*

### A touch of corruption

Support for the monarchy has reached its lowest ebb in modern history. For the first time most cabinet ministers are probably republicans; as are the two most important members of the kitchen cabinet, Cherie Blair and Alastair Campbell. The Observer and the Guardian have concluded that the monarchy, as symbol of hereditary privilege and cultural retrogression, is unacceptable. Major constitutional change is on the cards.

In the great scheme of things this is scarcely a sea change. The Stuart monarchy was briefly abolished and the dynasty was later brought to an end. Its German successors were widely hated. George III, many thought, should never have occurred. When George IV died London rejoiced and all Windsor got drunk. In 1870 red caps of liberty were brandished in Trafalgar Square and in 1919 trade unionists hoped to see the red flag flying over Buckingham Palace. During the Depression eastenders shook their fists at the present Queen's father and shouted: "We don't want royal parasites."

Nevertheless, for well over a century before the current crisis the monarchy basked in public esteem. Sovereigns were sustained by social deference, by what Richard Cobden called "the insatiable love of caste that in England, as in Hindustan, devours all hearts". They were supported by politicians of every party, who devised new titles, honours and ceremonies to foster the devotion of the masses and to present patriotism as loyalty to a dynasty.

They were puffed by the mass media, by Gold Nibs in-waiting who suppressed news of royal scandals and virtually deified the sovereign. Witness Lord Northcliffe's letter to Edward VII's private secretary: "We shall be very glad to be told what to print and what to omit." Witness the Times heralding the 1937 coronation: "The crown is the necessary centre, not of political life only, but of all life." Divine right had gone but not the divinity that doth hedge a king.

This was enhanced by Walter Bagehot (right), who maintained in *The British Constitution* (1867) that "above all things



royalty is to be revered". Bagehot's classic, which established such conventions as the monarch's right to advise, encourage and warn ministers, is the nearest thing we have to a written constitution. And thereby hangs a cluster of ironies.

Bagehot is usually considered a Victorian version of his ineffable modern editor, Lord St John of Fawsley. In fact, he was a journalist of such intelligence that Queen Victoria thought him a dangerous radical and forbade the future George V to read him. Moreover, Bagehot did not favour monarchy as a system of government when people were educated enough to use their votes wisely. At the end of the book he stated that "constitutional royalty under an active and half-insane king is one of the worst governments" - a thought, maybe, for Charles III.

However, Bagehot was hijacked by the establishment. He was presented as an unambiguous advocate of constitutional monarchy. He was selectively quoted and particular emphasis was given to his view that secrecy is "essential to the utility of English royalty. Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic".

The crowned head was sometimes paraded like a pageant, more often hidden like a fetish. The sovereign became the focus of a spurious religion, the god in the governmental machine, surrounded by flunkies. When Harold Nicolson undertook to write the official biography of George V, the King's private secretary told him to "omit things and incidents which were discreditable to the royal family". Retrospective lese-majesty was not permitted. "You will be writing on the subject of a myth and it will have to be mythological."

The myth of the constitutional monarchy, neutral arbiter and national symbol, has been sedulously propagated over the last hundred years. But it bears little or no relation to reality.

Queen Victoria was a blinkered reactionary who betrayed Gladstone's confidences to Disraeli and Salisbury and considered it a grave defect in the constitution that radical governments should attain power "merely on account of the number of votes". Her eldest son, Edward, disapproved of women's suffrage, wanted the lower orders kept in their place and did his best to thwart Liberal measures.

George V's court reeked of Toryism, according to Lloyd George. But, as a Conservative party chairman said, the "very rightwing" King "managed to persuade the Labour party that he was entirely neutral". In 1931 he engineered a national government by appealing to Ramsay MacDonald's snobbish romanticism and undermined Labour for a decade, using the royal prerogative (as it is invariably used) to ensure that the more things change the more they remain the same.

Edward VIII was, as Winston Churchill privately acknowledged, "pro-Nazi". He might have made a quisling King, if not a royal Führer. George VI insisted that "India must be governed" and tried to interfere with the socialists' policy of nationalisation.

Queen Elizabeth II has been at the heart of government for half a century, yet we are almost entirely ignorant about the role she has played. She appears to have come to the throne determined to change nothing and hints of her conservatism emerge. Richard Crossman recorded that in 1967 she urged Harold Wilson to maintain theatre censorship. In 1980 Wilson told Lady Longford: "Tony [Benn] will never be leader [of the Labour party]. We should have to select someone the Queen could send for."

Earlier, certainly, she had sent for congenial grouse-shooters like Macmillan and Home, instead of RA Butler, who was outside the "magic circle". It seems that, like her forebears, the Queen is head of the establishment rather than the nation. This is inevitable since the crown has such a huge stake in the existing order. And sovereigns are insulated from the people by their wealth and position.

Of course, the monarch reigns but does not rule. However, the court still possesses what Edmund Burke called "innumerable methods of clandestine corruption" and it does not scruple to use them. This is because the crown is unaccountable. It exercises influence without responsibility.

Everyone concentrates on the recent implosion of the Windsors. But the monarchy has been failing the British people since Victoria's reign. It has clung to the body politic with the loyalty of a leech. It has sapped innovative thought and encouraged delusions of grandeur. It has sustained hierarchy and idolatry in an increasingly egalitarian, rational world. It has helped to justify undemocratic practices and a system of closed government that is a national disgrace

Were Bagehot alive today he would surely denounce the monarchy as a consecrated obstruction. He would have no truck with a New Labour People's Monarchy, which would continue to select our head of state by genetic lottery instead of the ballot box. And he would produce a new constitutional blueprint enshrining the sovereignty of the people.

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## 6. Books

*The following books, written by Piers Brendon, are listed in chronological order of publication:*

Hurrell Froude and the Oxford Movement (1974)

Hawker of Morwenstow - Portrait of a Victorian Eccentric (1975)

A Quest of the Sangraal, Cornish Ballads & Other Poems (1975; Robert Stephen Hawker, editor)

Eminent Edwardians (1979; ISBN 0-395-29195-X)

The Life and Death of the Press Barons (1983)

Winston Churchill: A Brief Life (1984)

Ike - the Life and Times of Dwight D. Eisenhower (1986)

Our Own Dear Queen (1986)

Thomas Cook - 150 Years of Popular Tourism (1991)

The Age of Reform 1820–1850 (1994)

The Motoring Century: Story of the Royal Automobile Club (1997)

The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s (2000; ISBN 0-375-70808-1)

The Windsors - A Dynasty Revealed 1917–2000, with Phillip Whitehead (2000: ISBN 0712667970. Original 1994; ISBN 978-0340610138)

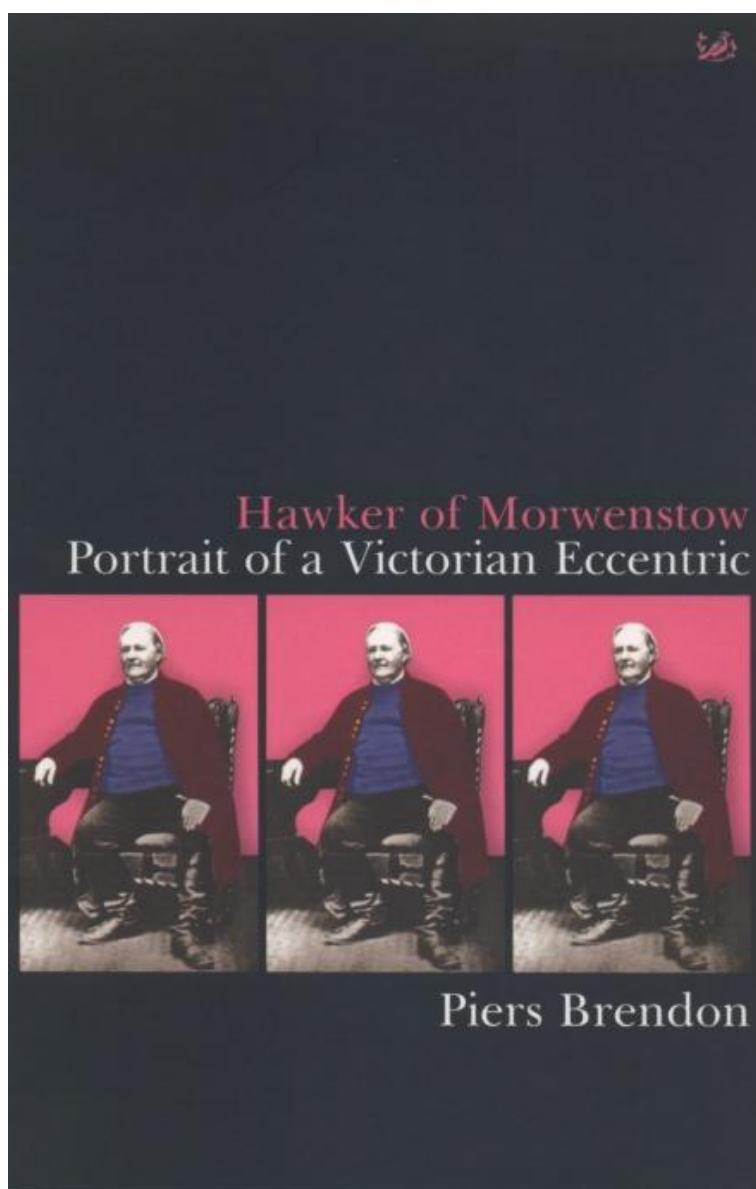
The Decline and Fall of the British Empire. London: Jonathan Cape. 2007. ISBN 978-0-307-26829-7 – via Internet Archive.

Eminent Elizabethans (2013), Penguin Books, ISBN 978-0-099-53263-7.

Churchill's Bestiary (2018). Michael O'Mara Books Ltd.

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## 7. Hawker of Morwenstow



**Hawker of Morwentow: Portait of an Eccentric Victorian, by Piers Brendon. Published by Penguin in 1975.**

*The book is described by its publisher thus:*

This illuminating biography of Robert Stephen Hawker (1803-75) unravels fully the famous Cornish parson-poet's rich personality. Drawing on a mass of unpublished material, Piers Brendon re-creates one of the most bizarre of Victorian lives, revealing the mixture of truth, over-simplification and falsehood in the legend which has built up around him.

The popular account depicts Hawker as a youth of wild high spirits who delighted in hoaxes and practical jokes. As an Oxford undergraduate he won the Newdigate Poetry Prize and married his rich 41-year-old

godmother. In 1834 he became vicar of Morwenstow and spent the rest of his life in his desolate country parish on the storm-swept coast of north Cornwall. He was a charitable, hard-working Anglo-Catholic but, owing to the remoteness of his position and lack of sympathy from his parishioners, his true genius became warped and he succumbed to wayward eccentricity.

His dress was, to say the least, unorthodox, and he became obsessed with antiquarian lore, lending a haunting reality to the arcane superstitions which he cultivated. He entertained no doubt whatever about the active agency of demons and angels, ghosts and brownies. He talked to birds, invited his nine cats into church and excommunicated one of them when it caught a mouse on Sunday. Out of the timbers of wrecked ships he built a hut, a forbidding sanctuary perched on the high cliff-edge, where he invoked mystic visions and composed romantic poetry.

Piers Brendon here rescues Hawker from legend, and his fascinating book substitutes character for caricature. An even more interesting and idiosyncratic Hawker emerges, scarred and moulded by the stark isolation of his hostile seaboard benefice, a man of remarkable insight and compassion, who submitted in strange ways to his calling, and who, it turns out, proves to have been a true prophet in his yearning exclamation: 'what a life mine would be if it were all written and published in a book.'



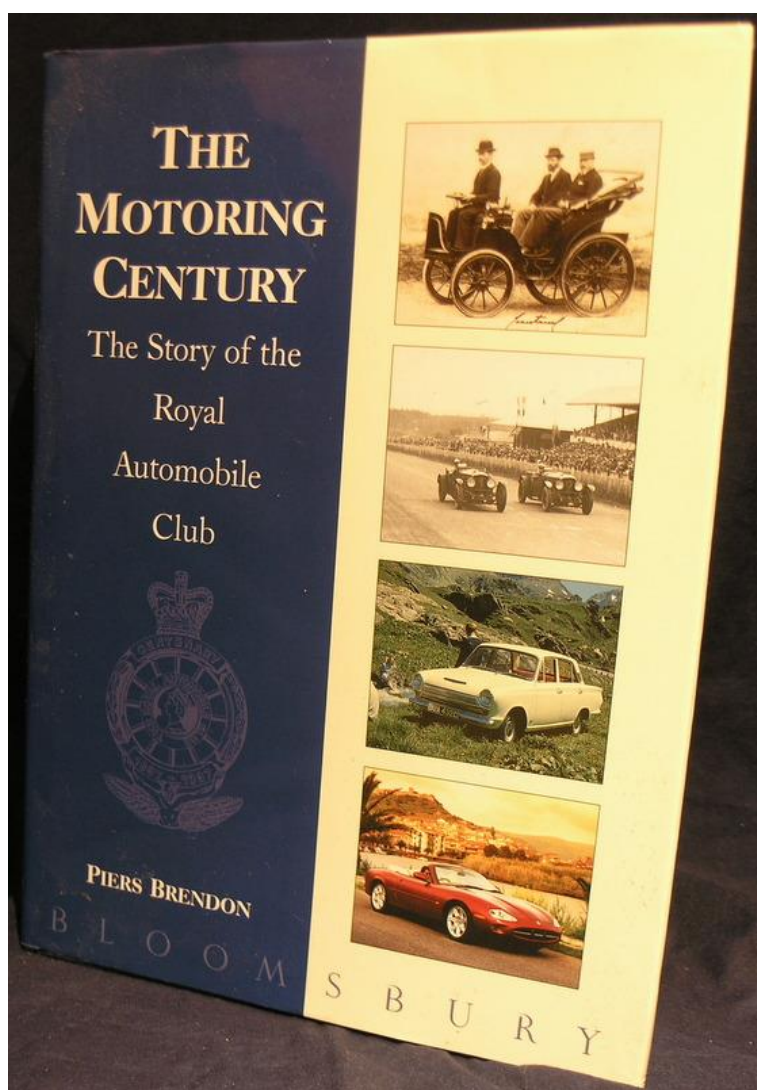
*Hawker's Hut is an historic hut at Morwenstow, Cornwall originally built by the eccentric clergyman, poet and antiquarian, Robert Stephen Hawker (1803 – 1875), close to Higher Sharpnose Point. The hut is located approximately 1 mile from Morwenstow Church. The hut is mainly of timber construction and is partially built into the hillside (earth sheltered) with a turf roof. It was originally built from driftwood and timber retrieved from shipwrecks by the eccentric vicar and poet. Parson Hawker spent many hours in the hut writing poems and smoking opium, perhaps inspired by the views*

*of the Atlantic Ocean. Visitors to the hut during Hawker's time there included Alfred Tennyson in 1848[2] (with whom Hawker toured Tintagel) and Charles Kingsley. Today the hut is accessible on foot from the coastal footpath via a short set of steps.*

*Hawker's hut has been maintained since its original construction although some of the original elements are still present. It is currently the smallest property belonging to the National Trust. (Caption archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Wikipedia).*

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## 8. The Motoring Century



*The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Independent website at [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk). It was written by Gavin Green in April 1997.*

### **The Motoring Century: The Story of the Royal Automobile Club.**

As you grapple with increasing traffic, pollution and cities scarred by the motor car, it may be tempting to hark back to the golden age of transport, when stately horses and carriages plied the streets, and the air was as clear as a brisk autumn breeze. The *Motoring Century: The Story of the Royal Automobile Club* by Piers Brendon makes clear that this Arcadian view of our past was about as realistic as the notion that children were happier and our streets safer back in the good old Victorian days. They were nothing of the sort.

That cars would invariably be cleaner than horses was an Edwardian truism, supported by the likes of the Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, Rudyard Kipling (who described the horse as "the hairy enemy") and HG

Wells. At the turn of the century, Britain had 3 million horses, each producing between three and four tons of dung a year. And as most lived in towns and cities, "a large town is really a colossal midden with houses dotted about in it", a journalist wrote in 1900. Horse-drawn vehicles were also far noisier than cars: the book notes "the extraordinary thunderous noise of the streets of London, when they were crammed with steel-wheeled horse-drawn vehicles rumbling and clattering over granite block paving".

This is not a pro-car tome, though. Rather it is an intelligent and fascinating story chronicling the social history of the car in Britain. As it was commissioned by the RAC, it deals in detail with that strange organisation that acts as national motoring organisation, governing body of British motor sport and Pall Mall social club.



*Austin Seven Tourer 1930.*

Brendon says he was given a free hand to write a warts-and-all account of the car and of the club, and the book reads as such. Although the story ends on a bullish note for the RAC, throughout most of its history it comes across as a poorly managed, misogynous club for toffs, detached from the social mores of society. It resisted most compulsory speed limits, the breathalyser and the compulsory wearing of seat belts. In the early days, candidates were blackballed if they lacked the correct "background", were too obviously "in the trade", had a "common appearance", or "ran out of ditches".

The club decided that "a working manager was not eligible for election". In the 1930s, a sign in the club read: "Members are requested not to bring undesirable women into the club unless they be wives or relatives of members." Ladies in trouser suits were not admitted until 1970. Even today, women cannot be full members of the Pall Mall Club or sit on the RAC board. And not that many years ago, the chairman's chauffeur "looked

like a coachman and would only drive during the day because he could not see at night".

Brandon, whose past works include *Eminent Edwardians* and *Winston Churchill: A Brief Life*, writes in a breezy yet authoritative style, which makes the book highly readable. His words are backed up by excellent photographs, the older ones being especially interesting. Brendon chronicles the growing Edwardian momentum for the motor car, but also recounts, in great detail, the resistance to it. Early cars "barked like a dog, and stank like a cat", and frightened rural populations. Charles Rolls, of Rolls-Royce fame, noted that, "every other man climbed up a tree or a telegraph pole to get out of your way; every woman ran away across the fields; every horse jumped over the garden wall".

Cars initially exacerbated Britain's already enormous class barriers, because only the wealthy could afford them. One MP commented that for the first time since the French Revolution the working class looked on the wealthy as "an intolerable nuisance". A poor man "did not like to be run over by a man of superior social position". The Marquess of Queensberry announced he would carry a loaded revolver, to shoot dangerous drivers. Some farmers, sick of dust storms caused by cars on gravel roads, suggested that cars be fitted with bombs that would explode when the driver pressed too hard on the accelerator. A wire was stretched over the Slough-Maidenhead road in an attempt to decapitate drivers. In the countryside, cars were frequently stoned.



*Norton ES2 Motorcycle Combination 1961.*

Speed traps proliferated. Constables hid behind hedges using stopwatches, although some used church clocks. Most RAC members detested the traps, but the moderate majority was committed to reconciliation with the police. A more vociferous minority objected, accusing the club of "tasteful

posturing and elegant inertia". They were determined to strike "a blow for automobilism as opposed to blind prejudice, crass ignorance and that form of highway robbery which masquerades under the title of `fines' for so-called excessive speed". In June 1905, that breakaway group formed its own club. The AA was born. Its sole purpose was to fight police traps.

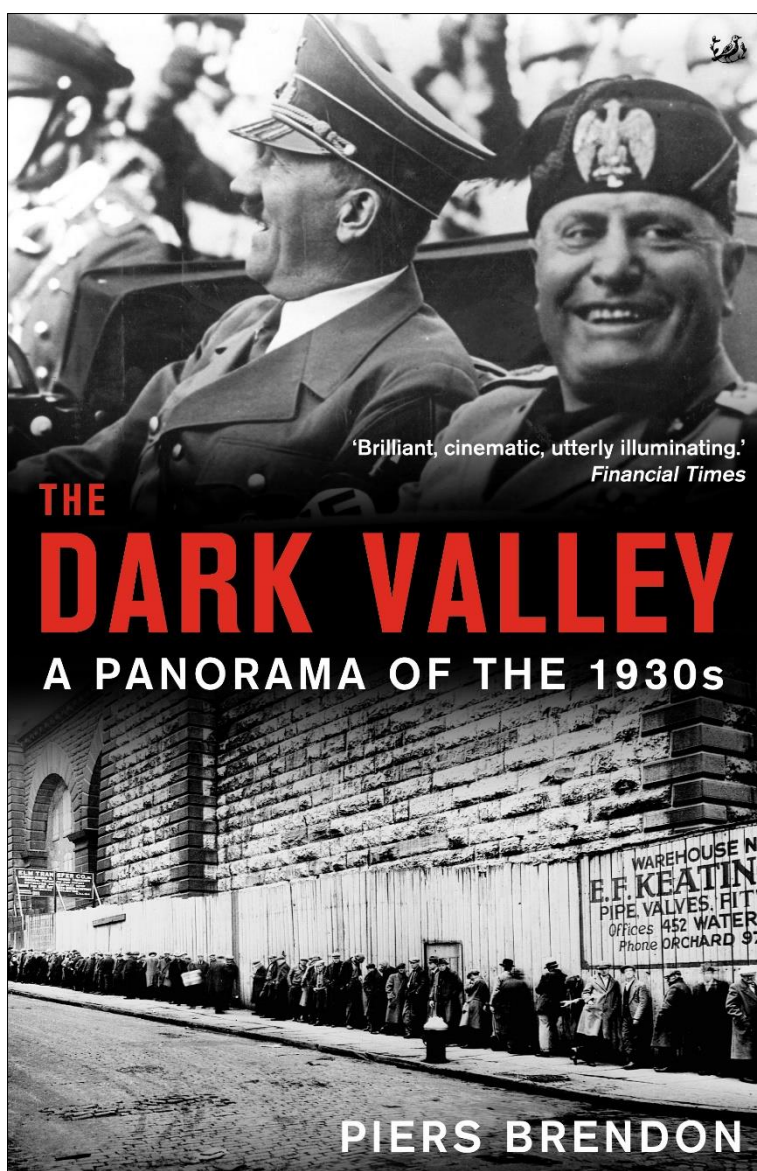
The early days of motoring form the most fascinating part of the book, but Brendon also deals well with the 1920s and '30s, when cars such as the Austin Seven put Britain on wheels. Cars lost their social stigma; the middle classes were now motorised. But there were downsides. "Sunday churchgoing was the first casualty of the vehicle of freedom. Instead of attending a place of worship, middle-class motorists drove into the country, visited the seaside, picnicked at beauty spots or went off to play tennis or golf."

There was no denying the profound change caused by the car. "It transported the country to the city and vice versa. It finally snapped the fetters of locality. It helped to transform Britain from a congeries of regions into a united kingdom."

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## 9. The Dark Valley



*The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Nepad website at [www.nepad.org](http://www.nepad.org).*

Piers Brendon's magisterial overview of the 1930s is the story of the dark, dishonest decade – child of one world war and parent of the next - that determined the course of the twentieth century. Dealing individually with each of the period's great powers - the USA, Germany, Italy, France, Britain, Japan, Spain and Russia - Brendon takes us through the ten years dominated by the Great Depression and political turmoil. When Broadway, Piccadilly Circus, the Kurfurstendamm and the Ginza - neon metaphors of hope after four years of carnage - grew dim as the giants of unemployment, hardship, strife and fear took their hold.

From the concentration camps of Dachau and Kolyma, the Ukraine famine and the American Dust Bowl, to the Moscow metro, the Empire State

Building and the Paris Exposition, The Dark Valley brings the 1930's back to life through meticulous scholarship. Brendon examines the great leaders - Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao TseTung, Haile Selassie and countless others - not with hindsight but in the context of their age; but also, through a vivid chronicling of contemporary experience, he gives us a sense of what it was to be living then.

**Some other reviews:**

Review "The best history book I've read since Orlando Figes' A People's Tragedy... Wonderful and enthralling" -- Ruth Rendell, Daily Telegraph.

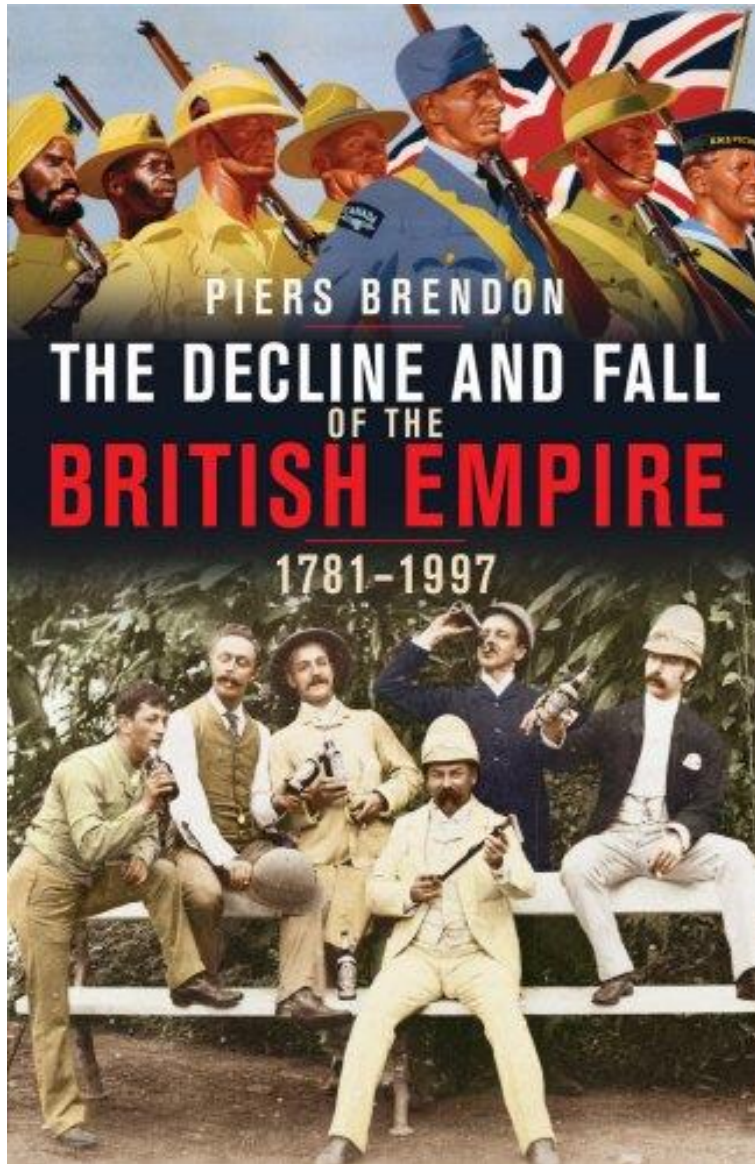
"Brilliant, cinematic, utterly illuminating... No other historical account I know can rival this... Masterly" -- Valentine Cunningham, Financial Times.

"A delight to read, a literary triumph sparkling with moments of real humour and compassion" -- Richard Overy, Sunday Telegraph.

"Piers Brendon's long book has such brilliance and narrative power, and contains so much fascinating detail, that reading it has all the excitement of novel" -- John Grigg, Evening Standard.

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## 10. The Decline and Fall of the British Empire



*The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Foreign Affairs journal at [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com). It was written by Philip Gordon, and was published in March 2009.*

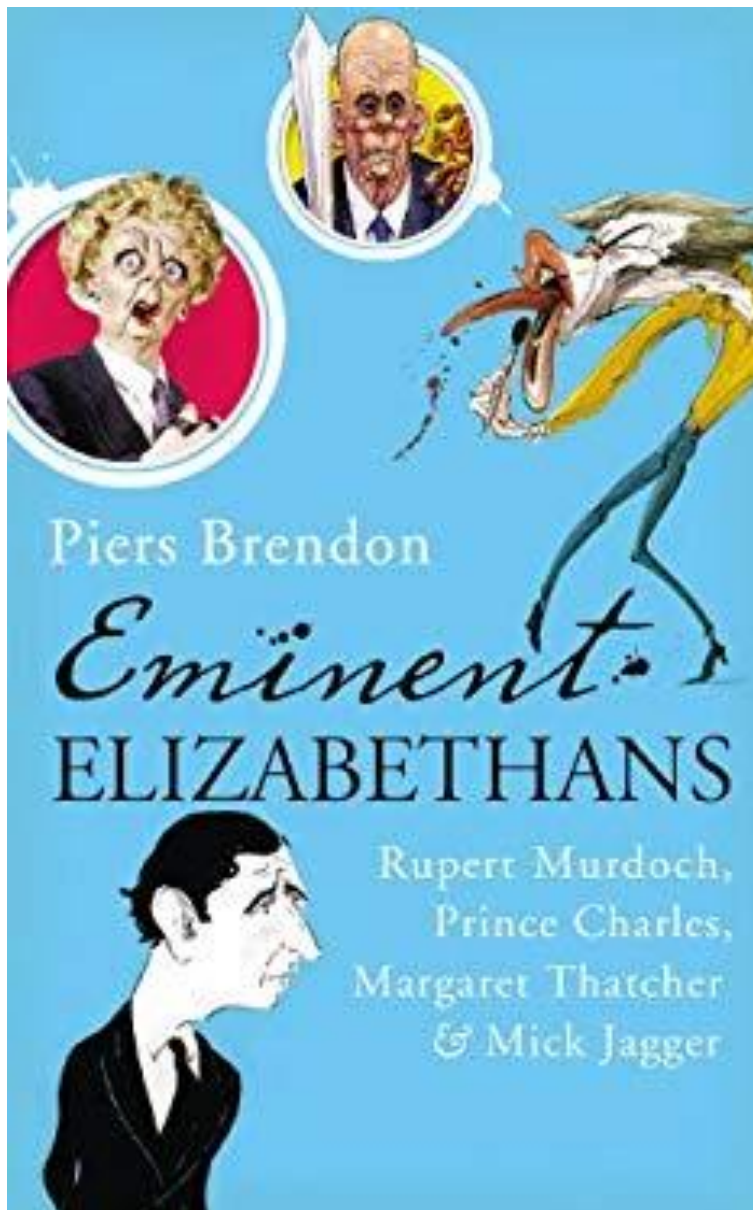
Only a very confident historian with a massive, comprehensive, and thoroughly researched manuscript would willingly invite comparisons with the British historian Edward Gibbon. Brendon, a Cambridge historian, fits that bill -- and has no reason to apologize for giving his study the only title that would suffice. Starting his tale in 1781, with General Charles Cornwallis' surrender to George Washington, and ending it with the British transfer of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, he shows how the British Empire "ended as haphazardly as it began." Some territories fought

their way to freedom, others mixed limited violence with negotiation, and still others cooperated with colonial authorities to arrange smooth transfers of power. Unlike Rome, of course, the United Kingdom did not end in domestic collapse, but the British Empire's decline and fall surpasses Rome's in terms of its scope and speed: between 1945 and 1965 alone, the number of British colonial subjects fell from over 700 million to five million.

Although noting the differences between the two empires, Brendon does point out that the British colonialists were very familiar with the Roman precedent. Indeed, the first volume of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published in 1776, just as the British Empire was starting to erode, and thus it "became the essential guide for Britons anxious to plot their own imperial trajectory." With the United States in the midst of the worst economic news since the Great Depression, and fighting global insurgents and costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, some American readers may be tempted to read this book in a similar fashion.

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## 11. Eminent Elizabethans



*The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Independent at [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk). It was written by Christopher Hirst, and was published in September 2013.*

Utilising the iconoclastic profiles in Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* as a template, Brendon produced *Eminent Edwardians* (Northcliffe, Balfour, Pankhurst and Baden-Powell) and now, thirty years on, *Eminent Elizabethans*.

The problem with his new subjects Murdoch, Thatcher, Jagger and Prince Charles, is that unlike his Edwardian targets, they are four of the most scrutinised figures of our era. Yet by utilising the research techniques of academic history (notes and bibliography run to 40 pages), Brendon substantiates his devastating critiques. He also has a keen eye for the killer

quote. From Douglas Hurd, we hear the absent-minded explanation from Thatcher why she preferred Major to him as successor ("He was the best of a very poor bunch") while Keith Richards reveals that Mick has "a tiny todger".

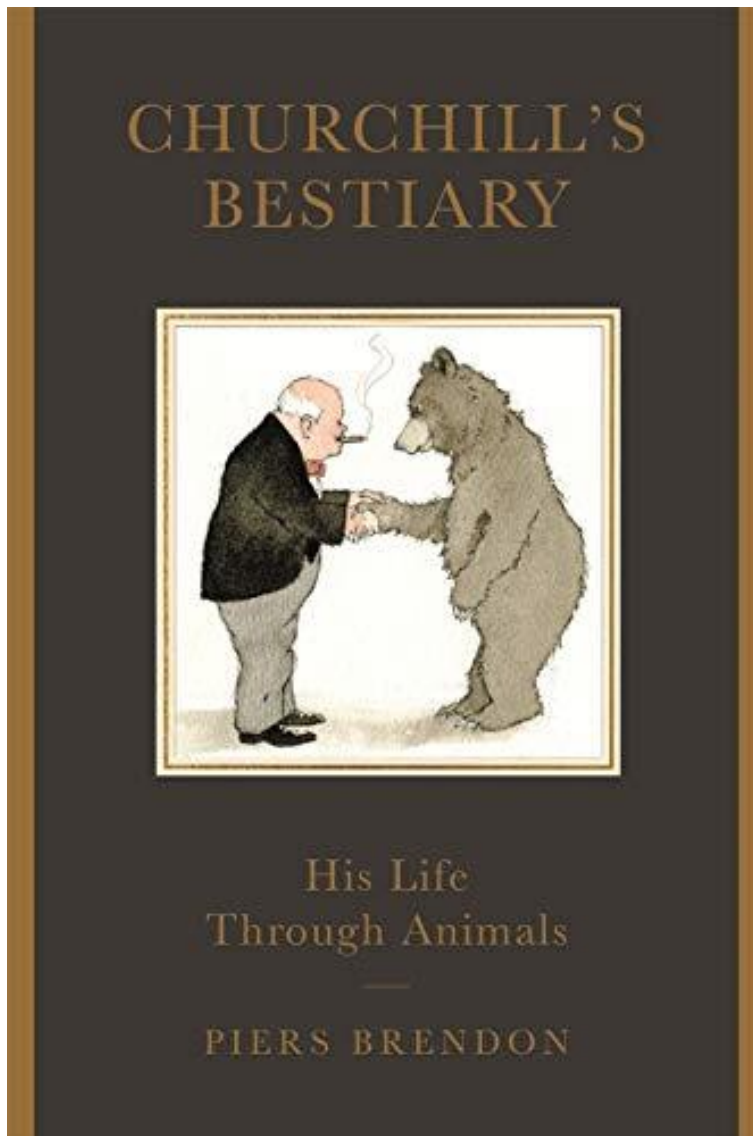
Of his four subjects, the heir to the throne emerges as the most intriguing. His chilly childhood is encapsulated by the Queen's decision to postpone reunion with her infant son "for several days" after a trip to Malta. He was an artistic oddity in a family whose idea of a cultural evening was, according to Anthony Blunt, "playing golf with a piece of coal on Aubusson carpets". "Easily misled by charlatans", Charles grew up to "esteem hierarchy" and "revere ritual". He developed "a swelling desire to impose his opinions." Yet Brendon concedes that his "warmth, charm, courtesy... and self-deprecating humour" restored his "battered" image".

No such redemption is granted to Jagger, whose early rebellious posturing hid a "Home Counties Tory, cautious, orthodox, old fashioned." Jagger himself insisted that his drug bust in 1967 is "why I turned bourgeois". Richards, a touchstone of droll objectivity, noted that "He'd never been anything but bourgeois."

Brendon delineates Jagger's misogyny, satyriasis, multiple personalities, relentless social climbing and bizarre stage persona ("pantomime demagogue"). Brendon's addictively enjoyable dissections are richly informative about this ego-driven quartet.

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## 12. Churchill's Bestiary



*The following review was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website [www.richardlangworth.com](http://www.richardlangworth.com). It was written by Richard Langworth, and was published in September 2019.*

“An enormously agreeable side of his character was his attitude toward animals,” Sir Anthony Montague Browne, his last private secretary, said of Winston Churchill. “Although a Victorian—and they were not notably aware of animal suffering—he had a sensitivity well in advance of his time.” Ever since Sir Anthony said that we’ve been waiting for a good book on the subject, and historian Piers Brendon has obliged. *His Bestiary* is well named: an encyclopedia on Churchill’s relations with animals, and allusions to them in his writings and speeches.

The anecdotes are not all about animals Churchill “knew personally” (as he said of a favorite goose). WSC also deployed animal analogies, many noted here. For example, bears and eagles represented Russians and Americans

respectively. Communists were crocodiles. Toads were the 1930s prime ministers Stanley Baldwin and Ramsay MacDonald. “Rat” was applied both as a noun (to reprehensible people) and a verb (famously to himself on changing parties: “to rat twice” and to “re-rat”).

### **The Poodles, Rufus I and II**

The Bestiary contains capsule bios of Churchill’s famous poodles, Rufus I and II. The first, acquired during the Second World War, became a constant companion. In 1947 Rufus was run over by a car. His replacement was Rufus II, a dog of variable health and “breath like a flame-thrower,” but Churchill was no less devoted.

Brendon tells us that Churchill even made assignations for his animal friend. In 1955 Rufus II received a proposal from a poodle named Jennifer. WSC sent Rufus’ reply: “My dear Jennifer, On the 10th of April I shall be going...to London. I should be very glad to receive you there.” The letter was marked, VERY PRIVATE. Once, watching “Oliver Twist,” the movie reached the point where Bill Sykes drowns his bull terrier to throw the police off his track. Churchill covered Rufus’s eyes with his hand: “Don’t look now, dear. I’ll tell you all about it afterwards.”

### **Perches and pates**

Late in WSC’s life, Field Marshal Montgomery presented him with a green budgerigar (parakeet) named Toby. Quite tame, he was often let loose to fly around. Brendon describes a session Toby spent on the bald head of Chancellor of the Exchequer R.A. Butler. Toby left fourteen tokens of esteem on RAB’s pate. Wiping his head with a white silk handkerchief, Butler sighed: ‘The things I do for England....’”

At mealtime, Toby “strutted across the dining table, knocked over glasses, helped himself to grapefruit, fought with his reflection in the silver pepper pot. He even tried whisky, Brendon writes, and “apparently once fell into his master’s brandy glass. This did nothing to diminish Churchill’s affection....” In his role as literary aide, Toby lapped ink from Churchill’s pen, “embellishing his letters with blots and scribbles.... He nibbled the edges of book and proof pages—“an indication, in Churchill’s view, that he had read them: ‘Oh! Yes, that’s all right,’ Churchill would say, ‘give him the next chapter.’”

### **Lord Wardens of the Cinque Mouseholes**

Wherever Churchill lived there was a cat or two. When he moved to Downing Street from the Admiralty in 1940, he brought along Nelson, a formidable grey tom who served the war effort, he said, “by acting as a prime ministerial hot water bottle.” Nelson soon chased away the previous resident, a holdover from Chamberlain whom the Churchills had christened



“Munich Mouser.” Nelson was congratulated. But the PM was aghast during an air raid, to find Nelson hiding under a chest of drawers: “Come out Nelson! Shame on you, bearing a name such as yours, to skulk there while the enemy is overhead.”

For Sir Winston’s 88th birthday in 1962, his private secretary Jock Colville presented him with a ginger tom which WSC named “Jock.” This faithful cat was on his bed at Hyde Park Gate when he died. At his request, Chartwell has kept a ginger cat named Jock on the premises ever since. Other Chartwell cats were addressed Mister or Miss Cat. Churchill attempted conversation with them, not always successfully. On a certain morning, meeting one in the passage, he said, “Good morning, Cat.” The cat deigned not to reply. He slashed at it and it ran away. Remorseful, he had a card placed in a window: “Cat: Come home. All is forgiven. Winston.” Cat did return, and was rewarded with fresh salmon and cream.

### **“Tender solicitude”**

At Chartwell, Brendon writes, animals inhabiting the farms and woodlands were as dear as pets. “One of the heifers has committed an indiscretion before she came to us and is about to have a calf,” he wrote his absent wife in 1935. “I propose however to treat it as a daughter.” The Churchills’ friend Lady Diana Cooper listed some of Chartwell’s more or less domestic birds: “five foolish geese, five furious black swans, two ruddy sheldrakes, two white swans—‘Mr. Juno and Mrs. Jupiter,’ so called because they got the sexes wrong to begin with—two Canadian geese (‘Lord and Lady Beaverbrook’) and some miscellaneous ducks.

Piers Brendon supplies a long chapter on swans, including the exotic black variety from Australia, which thrived in Chartwell’s ponds. Alas, they were vulnerable to the predations of foxes—who roamed freely because Churchill could not resist trying to befriend them! Sir Winston related to the swans “in a personal and paternalistic fashion...[He loved] to give them bread and feel them nibbling at his fingers, to look at them and look after them with ‘tender solicitude.’”

### **“Man’s faithful friend the horse”**

Brough Scott’s *Churchill at the Gallop* is the most detailed book on this topic, but Piers Brendon does it justice in two chapters, “Horses” and “Racehorses.” From his training at Sandhurst to riding with hounds in his seventies and racing thoroughbreds into his eighties, Churchill loved horses. Stationed in India, he maintained several polo ponies, and was in his Fifties when he played his last chukka. His compassion was displayed in his efforts to repatriate Britain’s surviving war horses at the end of World War I.

Brendon thoroughly covers his postwar horse racing; Churchill owned fifty thoroughbreds, including a dozen brood mares. His most famous and winning thoroughbred was Colonist II, a French three-year-old he acquired for £1500. “Why don’t you sell your horse?” a Labour opponent shouted. WSC replied: “I am doing my best to fight against the profit motive.” Asked why he didn’t put Colonist to stud he cracked: “What? And have it said that the Prime Minister of Great Britain is living off the immoral earnings of a horse?”

### **A world of animals**

Churchill’s first encounter with a giant panda was at the London Zoo. He “gazed long at the animal, lying supine and unaware of the honour done to it.” Then he exclaimed: “It has exceeded all my expectations...and they were very high!” Another zoo favorite was his lion “Rota,” presented by an admirer in 1943. “I don’t want the lion at the moment either at Downing Street or Chequers owing to the Ministerial calm which prevails there,” Churchill told the Zoo. Later he showed Rota’s photograph to a diminutive secretary, Patrick Kinna: “If there are any shortcomings in your work I shall send you to him,” he winked. “Meat is very short now.”

This is just a representative fraction of Piers Brendon’s comprehensive book. Most of the anecdotes have not appeared previously and are thus quite valuable. Anyone interested in the personal side of the great man owes it to themselves to buy a copy.



*Churchill greets ‘Rommel’, Montgomery’s cocker spaniel, at Monty’s HQ, Chatgeau Cruelly, August 1944. Churchill is in his uniform as an Honorary Air Commodore.*