

Richard Freeman: 'Unsinkable': Churchill and the First World War (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2013)

As might be expected, with the centennial 'commemoration' of the Great War (1914-19) already in full-swing, there would be interest in Winston Churchill's part in this gigantic conflict. Of course, it might also be argued that there is no apparent need. After all, the man himself justified his actions at length post-war, in his *The World Crisis* and there have been many subsequent biographies, arguably culminating in Martin Gilbert's multi-volume study. Nevertheless, detailed study of records and events show that there are still areas of his professional life that have not been touched upon in any of these. So, perhaps a work concentrating on Churchill's First World War performance is called for after all, says Len Burnett.

The title, describing this politician as 'unsinkable' definitely gave me the impression that the author sought to present a sophisticated examination as to why Churchill could make so many serious professional errors and still manage to return to political power. In assessing whether to read this book, or not, I skim read some sections on events that I knew where Churchill had been criticised publically. These particular tracts found outlined some of this man's known character defects and so, I regarded the promotional spiel on the dust-jacket as just that.

On reading the book properly I soon realised that my tentative opinion had been misplaced though. In essence, this is two entirely different texts in one. The circumstances as to how this came about I obviously do not know. However, I could make an intelligent guess that the elements on Churchill's less than palatable traits were introduced during the editorial process. If so, the result is merely confusing and I sense will please no readership, other than, perhaps, those that regard this politician in heroic terms, but are also prepared to acknowledge that he had faults.

In my own research I always apply an initial test of potential worth of material: from doctoral theses through to published works. This relates to the accuracy, or otherwise, in terminology and definitions. If authors do not have a meaningful understanding of basic terms, or are sloppy their use, I am immediately suspicious of their analysis. This book fails in this test, as it is full of minor factual errors. For instance, commissioned officers' ranks are easily checkable these days and so, even if some arose in the editing process, they should still have been corrected at the proofreading stage.

Since the style is perfectly readable, with some genuinely interesting insights, if sloppy terminology and definitions were the only faults I may still have been prepared to recommend it as a useful study. Unfortunately, there are more. For a start the author betrays an inherent lack of knowledge of martial affairs. This can be seen time and time again, in all sorts of subjects and events. Readers with a good knowledge of technical matters and/or operations will especially see the flaws in Mr. Freeman's analysis.

This leads directly to the next inherent weakness, in that the author has continually made out that his personal opinions are fact. Some of these should be identified even by general readers without deep understandings, since text is not infrequently utterly contradictory.

Admittedly, everyone has to edit out information in writing accounts of past events at some time: if only to ensure some clarity. This has been done to such a degree as to imply coherence in Churchill's behaviour though that simply cannot be regarded as accurate. After all, there are just too many documents and detailed accounts by others that show that overseeing the conduct of the war was greatly complicated. It can be argued that there was indeed logic in Churchill's actions, but this might be regarded as rather unrealistic at best and unpalatable at worst. Even before governmental archives were opened to public scrutiny, Trumbull Higgins, in his scholarly *Winston Churchill and the Dardanelles*, went a long way in clearly explaining both of these traits.

Perhaps the most annoying aspect is the author's denial of Churchill's responsibility in any of his behaviour that led to serious implications for others: such as the pointless death, injury and illness for so many of numerous nations. It is well known that Churchill himself repeatedly made denials, both during this First World War and for the rest of his long life. However, these claims need not necessarily be taken as having reflected reality. After all, there is much evidence, including in files that the author has himself cited that show Churchill deliberately taking action against sensible professional advice. Of course, it can be said with legitimate justification that not all this professional advice was sound. Nevertheless, it can be seen that in wartime at least, Churchill hardly ever sought out those with relevant technical expertise and instead, surrounded himself with individuals that he thought were of a like mind, or that could be easily manipulated.

This politician was many things, a 'victim' of his many enemies he certainly was not. It is precisely in this manner that this author has portrayed him after his rightful fall from power in 1915. In spite of a myriad of complexities, careful study of the original records clearly shows that Churchill was indeed the prime force behind the decisions that resulted in the humiliating

defeats in the Dardanelles and on the Gallipoli Peninsula for the Allies. For this he should have taken responsibility, but seems to have been completely incapable of this and unfortunately, even now all too often others are similarly not prepared to acknowledge this.