

# LETTERS OF A GLOBETROTTER

A Sultan's Tribute to Sir Winston by Jack Goldfarb

Thomas Hopker/Woodfin Camp



*Young Winston at play: one of many dioramas in Brunei's Churchill Museum.*

In the 90-year span of his eventful life, Winston Churchill hardly ever stayed put. As an adventurous soldier-correspondent, he sent frontline dispatches from such far-flung locales as Cuba, the Sudan, South Africa and the Swat Valley on India's Northwest Frontier. As a military officer, he fought in Egypt, India and on the battlefields of France. As a statesman, he shaped more than a few chapters of history in such diverse regions as North Africa, the Middle East, the Crimea, North America and the Caribbean.

One land he never came near, however, was the island of Borneo, out where the far Pacific reaches the South China Sea. Yet, there in the tiny Sultanate of Brunei, on Borneo's steaming northern coast, stands a most impressive tribute to the man historians will probably deem the outstanding personage of the 20th century.

Bandar Seri Begawan is the hard-to-remember name of the capital of Brunei, where, in the town center, the former sultan (now retired), His Highness Omar Ali Saifuddin, has estab-

lished the multimillion-dollar Churchill Memorial Museum, together with a cultural center, in honor of this eminent Englishman.

Adjacent to the sultan's lavish Royal Ceremonial Hall, with its exquisite golden throne and gold-crowned roof, and the equally opulent Parliament Building, rises the unique Churchill Memorial, designed in the form of a long, sweeping crescent. Besides the museum, the building houses a reference library, tropical fish aquarium and an exhibition gallery. The structure's three-dimensional façade, gleaming white, with golden mosaic panels and a modern Oriental-style crenelated roof, serves as a dramatic proscenium for the larger-than-life eight-foot bronze figure of a doughty "Winnie" poised on a granite pedestal, thrusting his "V" salute defiantly skyward.

Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin, who abdicated in 1967 in favor of his son, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, the present ruler, was a great admirer of Churchill. The elder sultan was inspired to create the memorial after having met

Churchill during a visit in Britain.

Despite several other existing collections of Churchilliana—at the Churchill Memorial and Library in Fulton, Missouri, where Churchill made his historic "iron curtain" speech; at his birthplace, Blenheim Palace, in Oxfordshire; at his former home, Chartwell, in Kent; and at Cambridge University's Archives Center—the Bruneians claim theirs is the only museum of its kind. Designed by Singapore-based architect Ho Kok Yin, the museum opened in 1972, with Churchill's youngest daughter, Mary Soames, an honored guest.

Churchill's extended and many-sided career has produced an abundance of materials for the museum to choose from. James Gardner, a Londoner commissioned by the sultan to devise and assemble the exhibits, has done a skillful job in not allowing his appreciation of Churchill's life to become too venerated, yet he has demonstrably portrayed the humanity and warmth of Churchill's personality and the magnitude of his accomplishments. There is an understandable emphasis on the momentous events of World War II, when, leading his nation from the brink of defeat to soaring victory, the lion-hearted prime minister experienced his own "finest hour."

Churchill's life story unfolds from childhood to ripe old age through scores of photographs, realistic dioramas, nostalgic memorabilia (although many items are reproduced) and recordings of his classic speeches.

The loneliness of Churchill's childhood years is poignantly recalled when we see an aged photograph of Mrs. Everest, the governess whom he adored and who cared for him during his mother's frequent absences. Churchill carried her photo all his life, and traveled a great distance to see her when she was dying.

There is also an old-fashioned slide



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lantern, a butterfly collection and a huge assemblage of a thousand toy soldiers with which the boy Winston loved to plot out strategy and wage great military battles. A photo of him dressed in a sailor's suit (a popular style for boys when Britain was the world's greatest naval power) is a marvelous picture, no doubt widely circulated in the British press when he later became First Lord of the Admiralty.

Another exhibit, describing how the boy hated school and was a hopelessly poor student, adds a measure of irony to a red gown and black cap of the type he wore when he received an honorary degree from the University of London. The reluctant pupil grew up to be awarded many such academic honors in his lifetime.

Churchill's great leap into prominence is recalled by a copy of a South African poster offering a £25 reward for "escaped prisoner [sic] of war, Churchill, dead or alive." Taken captive off a British armored train by the Afrikaners while he was covering the Boer War as a military correspondent, the 25-year-old Churchill pulled off a spectacular escape. Making his way back to the British lines, he became a national hero overnight.

Subsequent displays of newspaper front pages evoke other highlights in his career: his vivid dispatches from the embattled Indian Northwest Frontier to London's *Daily Telegraph* in 1897, which won him high praise; a photo in the *Daily Mirror* of the young Churchill brandishing his hat in victory on his first election as a Member of Parliament; copies of the *British Gazette*, a stopgap newspaper that he published when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer during the General Strike of 1926.

His more serious writings occupy a more conspicuous space. Spread out along bookshelves graced with a quill pen and Victorian inkstand are collections of his works on both World Wars, the four-volume *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, his only novel, *Savrola*, which earned him mixed reviews, and his celebrated six-volume biography of his ancestor, the first Duke of Marlborough, which helped him win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953.

Winston Churchill was a man of many hats, figuratively and literally. He had a passion for collecting and wearing all kinds of headgear, which he carried off with splendid panache.

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His innate flair for the dramatic is apparent in the actual headpieces and photographs displayed here: a Harrow student's straw hat, polo helmet, African bush hat, garrison cap, World War I aviator's cap, tall topper and distinctive homburg.

Another Churchillian hallmark, the cigar, gets display space, too. A box of his favorite Havanas, Romeo and Juliet Piramidos, is accompanied by a receipt from his favorite tobacconist, Robert Lewis of St. James Street, London, with whom he maintained an account for over 60 years. Churchill's stogy-smoking habit (he smoked about nine a day) went back at least to the time when the 21-year-old Sandhurst graduate ventured off to Cuba to report on the 1895 revolt against Spanish rule. Spanish officers, interpreting the soldier-correspondent's presence there as official British support, showered him with boxes of Cuban cigars, a gesture repeated endlessly by Churchill's well-wishers during his lifetime.

Much has been written about Winston Churchill's work as an artist. Although he derived much pleasure and peace of mind from painting, he never looked upon his artistic endeavors as anything more than a relaxing hobby. Critical observers have called him a "gifted amateur." But popular interest in his paintings remains high, if not for their own sake, then surely for his name's sake. The Brunei museum displays a group of his canvases, several of them original landscapes. But the prized exhibit is his mottled wooden palette cluttered with brushes, half-squeezed color tubes and a worn palette knife, presented to the museum by Lady Clementine Churchill before her death in 1977.

Churchill's role in World War I is depicted in old photographs recounting the history of his support, as First Lord of the Admiralty, for the disastrous Gallipoli Campaign to open a route to the Russian allies through Turkey's Dardanelles. The pictures tell the story of his subsequent resignation, his active service in France as lieutenant colonel of a Scottish regiment of fusiliers, and his eventual return to the Whitehall Cabinet as Minister of Munitions.

Churchill's masterful oratory, which reached brilliant peaks of eloquence in response to the fateful crises of World War II, is preserved on tapes that movingly declaim his words over and

over again at the mere press of buttons. A recording of one of his most memorable speeches, made after the massive evacuation of Dunkirk, replays Churchill's grim determination to continue the war: "...we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." An unexpected postscript to this famous bellicose vow was actually tacked on when Mr. Churchill finished speaking in the House of Commons. It was reliably reported that he clapped his hand over the microphone and muttered, "And we'll hit them over the head with broken beer bottles, because that's bloody well all we've got!"

One of the most eerie and haunting exhibits in the museum is the replay of the actual sounds of an air raid over London during the Blitz. Made more immediate by a model of the city lit by probing searchlights and raging fires, the sirens wail mournfully, bombs whistle, thud and explode, the tattoo of anti-aircraft guns rakes the sky. Those were days of darkest ordeal, when Britain and the dogged Mr. Churchill stood alone. An invasion was imminent. But the indomitable prime minister was capable of broadcasting such verbal gems as "We are waiting for the long-promised invasion. So are the fishes."

It is said that Winston Churchill himself prepared in exacting detail how his funeral should be conducted; who was to march in the procession, and what music was to be played. Mindful of the American half of his ancestry, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* was included. In typical Churchillian style he is said to have code-named the plan for his final rites "Operation Hope Not."

The solemn strains and muffled drumbeats of the funeral march are on a recording, made on that gray wintry day in London, in January 1965, when Sir Winston was borne on a gun-carriage from Westminster to St. Paul's Cathedral before being laid to rest in a country churchyard in Oxfordshire.

A far cry from the tropical Sultanate of Brunei. But here, by the shores of the South China Sea, one of the great Englishmen of all time holds no less a place in honored memory than he does in his own homeland. □

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