

## Churchill's Headmaster

Salvaging the reputation of a man savaged by history, and a portrait of an epoch

Churchill's headmaster is a multilayered book. It is the first ever biography of Herbert Sneyd-Kynnersley. Sneyd-Kynnersley is known to history primarily through Winston Churchill's autobiographical "My Early Life" and biographies written by, among others, Winston's son Randolph Churchill. They characterized him as a sadist.

Why tell this story? Dutton says that "the nuts and bolts of history" are the people who shaped the lives of those who are written into history books. It serves Dutton as a vehicle for expounding on a number of themes that interest him: the decline of society, homosexuality and pedophilia, religion, and psychology.

To put Sneyd-Kynnersley in context, Dutton provides a rich description of English class structure in the late Victorian era, a history of the preparatory and public schools of the time, an extensive description of Sneyd-Kynnersley's family tree, and a fairly detailed exposition on Churchill's family tree.

Dutton, an evolutionary psychologist, goes into great depth analyzing the psychological makeup of this man in particular and male private school teachers in general, how does a scion of the upper-class wind up in what is today a fairly low prestige occupation, that of school teacher? How did he perceive his role? Dutton argues that teaching was a much more prestigious position in Victorian times. The elite schools took very seriously the mission of forming the men who made the British Empire. Wellington supposedly said "The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton."

The book's subtitle speculates that the course of history might have been changed if Winston had been compelled to spend a few more years with this strong-minded headmaster whose intent would be to mold him into a disciplined man. The history Dutton relates shows that Churchill was so intelligent and willful that he was able to get his own way, often with catastrophic results. He was responsible for the disaster at Gallipoli in World War I; the financial crisis that resulted from keeping Britain on the gold standard far too long when he was chancellor of the Exchequer; and hardheadedly pushing ill advised military schemes on his commanders and allies during the War.

Dutton contends that Sneyd-Kynnersley was still a child at heart – a case of arrested development. Hence his great enthusiasm for being with boys, a thing that men who feel themselves fully adult would normally eschew. After an extensive discourse on homosexuality and pedophilia, especially in a private school context, he concludes that while there may have been an attraction, Sneyd-Kynnersley almost certainly never acted on it. The headmaster's buoyant enthusiasm appears, by the accounts of many other students, to have been an inspiration rather than a handicap.

This is totally believable to me, a trustee and teacher in Washington DC private schools. Quite a few men are either overtly or covertly gay, but scandal about seducing pupils is relatively rare. In this #MeToo# age we can be quite sure we would hear about it! The headmaster who smeared his face with marshmallow for Halloween was a very popular man with the students, whatever we parents may have thought.

Much has been made of the corporal punishment that Churchill underwent, especially whipping with a birch stick instead of a cane. The nuances are lost on a modern reader. Dutton describes the regime of corporal punishment in the mid-1880s when Churchill attended. What Churchill underwent may have been a bit on the harsh side, but was not inconsistent with the practices of the times. Roald Dahl's biography contains accounts of similar beatings forty years later. In my pre-Spock California primary school, the principal had a peg in his office upon which hung a paddle engraved "Board of Education." The bad boys were quite familiar with it.

The psychological portrait that Dutton draws of Winston Churchill is consistent with many other observers'. Even at the age of eight, when he first attended Sneyd-Kynnersley's school - St. George's, Ascot - Churchill was an insubordinate, insolent, gluttonous albeit very brilliant boy. Not only the Masters, but the other pupils found him insufferable.

Dutton describes Churchill as a psychopath, egotistically unconcerned with the feelings of others. In this he concurs with a number of biographers, most notably Pat Buchanan's 2008 "Hitler, Churchill, and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World."

One of the themes in Dutton's other works is epistasis, the interplay of genetics and the environment. He composes a psychological profile of Winston Churchill based on inherited traits and the environment in which he grew up. He was never very close to his family; they were so wealthy, and socially involved, that they fobbed young Winston off on wetnurses, nannies, and the school system.

Among the points that Dutton repeats is the observation that Churchill's personal finances were always a shambles, and that during his decade out of power, the 1930s, he became beholden to a group of international financiers who enabled him to scrape through with his estates intact. These financiers wanted to see Hitler taken down, and they knew Churchill, from his exploits in the Boer War and World War I, to be a man with a taste for war.

Dutton makes a point that I had not previously read, and certainly would have remembered. The Poland that Germany attacked in 1939 was itself a dictatorship, and did indeed oppress the German minority it had acquired in the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I. The democracies, including Britain, were not defending high principle when they came to Poland's aid.

Dutton describes virtue signaling in the Victorian age. The nonconformist religious sects – Unitarians, evangelical Christians and the like – embraced prison reform and other such issues of the day in order to signal their virtue. Of course, corporal punishment was on their agenda. More significantly, so was the end of colonialism and the assumption that every member of the human species was equal in ability and rights. This was the beginning of the undoing of the British Empire, and the multiculturalism movement that has so incapacitated Great Britain in the decades since World War II.

For whom did Dutton write this book? Every author must have an imagined reader who presumably will find the content intriguing. It is extensively footnoted, especially with regards to the family histories and the psychological analysis. In this respect it should be interesting to future researchers. It is an enlightening portrait of the era in which the two protagonists met. At a much higher level, it is a sweeping theory with regard to how Great Britain, and indeed all of the modern world, appear to be in decline. In this vein he includes several passages that echo his *At Our Wits End - Why We're Becoming Less Intelligent and What it Means for the Future* which advances the thesis that human evolution has been spinning backwards since the Industrial Revolution. The wealthy nations no longer experience what he calls “purifying natural selection”, as result of which they have an increasing load of “spiteful” mutations. These mutations can have physical manifestations, such as increasing obesity and asymmetry of features, but they are more often merely psychological quirks. Whatever they are, whereas in previous eras they would've been sufficient handicaps to prevent an individual from reproducing, now they do not.

Dutton expounds on the themes in this book on his YouTube channel “The Jolly Heretic.” It is a delight to see them presented in book format, which is quicker to read than watching video and more convenient as a reference. But, most interestingly of all, Dutton manages to salvage the reputation of Sneyd-Kynnersley, a man who so many people with any knowledge of Churchill have been taught to despise as a “perverted sadist.”