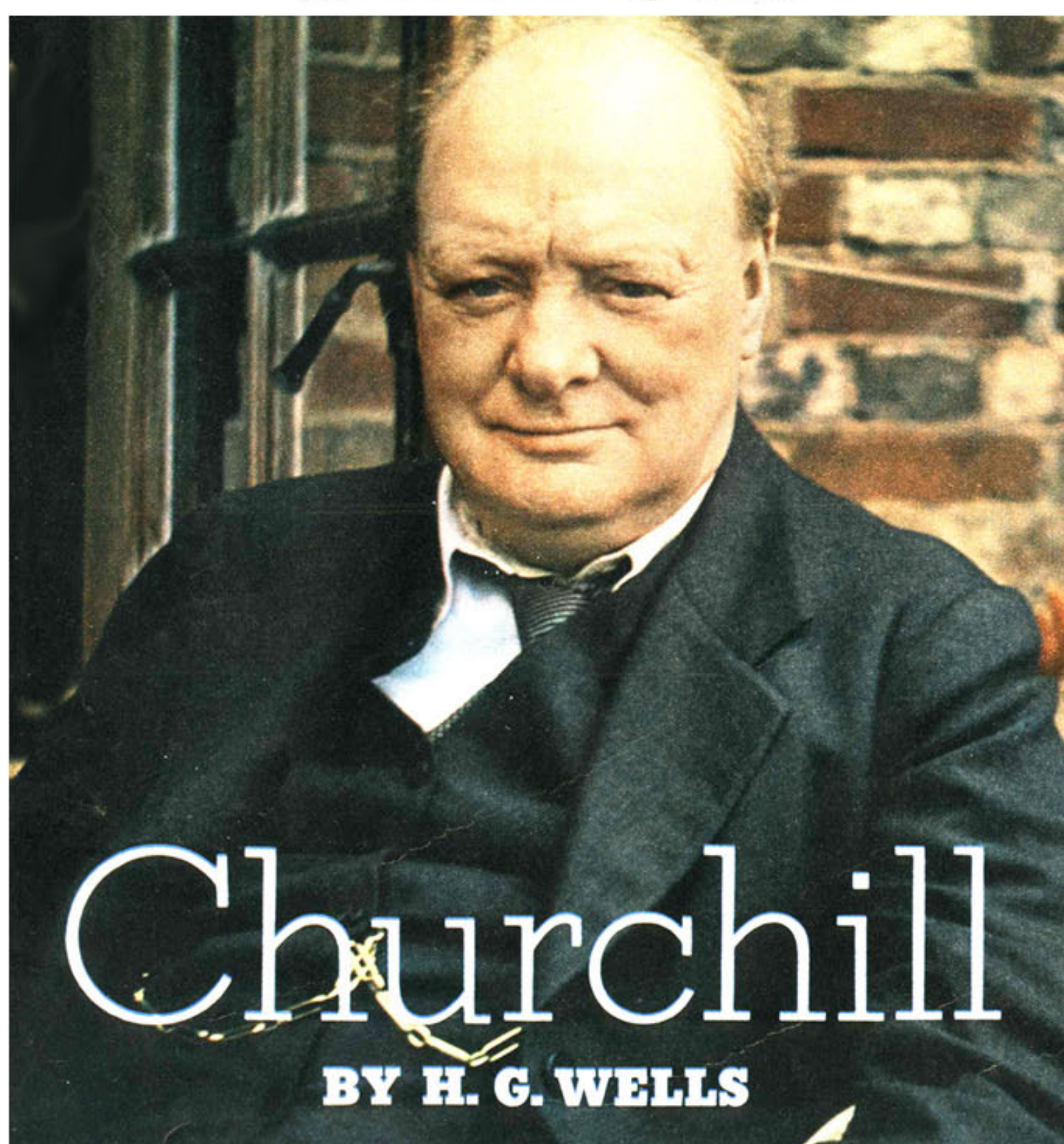


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Churchill

BY H. G. WELLS

I FORGET when I first met our prime minister. It must have been a third of a century or more ago. That was the age of "Mr. Arthur" Balfour, the "souls" and the week-end party.

The week-end party was a function in British public affairs. There was much freedom and frankness of discussion at these gatherings. A certain awareness of literature was in the pattern and most young writers who seemed at all original and promising found themselves entertained at times in large, agreeable houses by graceful and competent hostesses. The atmosphere was wealthy, but there was no insistence on money. They were sure about money in those days. They didn't worry about it and they displayed a carelessness about the new forms of conscious power that were then arising—the new press peers, the hard-faced industrial financiers and so forth that led at last to their undoing.

Two unwritten laws had obviously to be respected in that world of the week-end party: There must be no reporting of the ample freedom of speech that prevailed and no attempt to make any profitable use of the friendly intimacies that were established. On these conditions nobody felt on show, nobody posed. Characters revealed themselves and were of course scrutinized closely and discussed. Possibly there were exclusive and exalted sets in those days outside this general society but they did not seem to matter in the least to the general ease of the British social understanding.

Against this background moved our Winston Churchill, a young man in his early thirties talking orations and with effect of invincible and irrepressible vitality. He wrote with a slightly too rhetorical prose. He painted with vision and gusto. He went about doing all sorts of things and he betrayed an imaginative liveliness which many of his more staid friends distrusted be-

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cause, though thoughts and discussion were very free and easy then, Great Britain was still a staid and conservative country.

Mr. Churchill's mother was an American. She was a Jerome, and the Jerome factor is as manifest in his composition as is the slender and sensitive Vanderbilt strain in the make-up of the present Duke of Marlborough. After the death of the great duke it is remarkable how the Churchills vanish from the front page of British history. It is as if the New World had to be called in to reanimate the family genius before it could become effective again. Five dukes passed and left no trace. The seventh duke was a mediocre political respectability. His son was Lord Randolph Churchill, the father of the present prime minister. In him the dormant Churchill strain yawned and woke up and the Tory democracy with which his name is associated rejuvenated the Conservative party. But in comparison with his son he was still a fairly normal party politician.

From his school days the present prime minister has been at war with the traditions and protective solemnities of conservative British life. He went to Harrow and he did not succumb to the classical tradition. He disdained scholarship. He read English and history instead. He wore that strange Harrovian straw hat which was so like a premature halo at the back of his head and yet, as contrasted with Lord Halifax, his piety is unobtrusive and infrequent.

Nor could the army make a "military" man of him. He was as alert and fresh-minded about warfare as any in-



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telligent citizen with a turn for that sort of thing. Many people forget that to him we owe the timely mobilization of the British fleet in July, 1914. And he was the first man in any position of influence to realize the possibilities of the tank. As first lord of the admiralty he had the original tanks made and it was he who forced them upon the army. They were muffed and sabotaged by the military, who hated novelty more than defeat.

Always he had been inventive and irregular. Even the bricklaying in which he delights is irregular. His hats are unorthodox. He is always changing his hats. It has been a source of great joy to the caricaturists that nonordinary type of headdress seems made for him.

Now it is as though some merciful power has been putting together this most abnormal Englishman for the hour of Britain's utmost need. It is like awakening from a nightmare to think of what might have happened to my country without him.

It has still to be realized by the world how deeply the social, political and creative life of Great Britain had sunk into dullness during that third of a century which came to a climax on September 3, 1939. And not simply Great Britain. There is no simple explanation for the miasma of reaction that spread across the Atlantic communities after the Treaty of Versailles. It was not a world-wide reaction. Russia and China were in active fermentation. But undeniably the Western World ebbed mentally. A score of factors has been suggested for that ebb: The moral and physical exhaustion of the war, disappointment at its outcome, the killing of so many bright young spirits. The social dislocations caused by new, crude and aggressive types of wealth have also to be considered. All these forces were at work, no doubt, but when we have taken them all into account the explanation still seems incomplete.

There may have been personal accidents that favored the recession. We have in Pope's *Dunciad* the protest of a brilliant age overwhelmed at last in the leaden folds of the Protestant succession. Such phases happen in the lives of all nations, and our social biology is still too premature to trace the complex interplay of influences that will suddenly tone down the brilliance of a whole people. When such phases happen under an adverse star then they may herald the downfall of states and systems and empires. A people may indeed pass through a dull phase and reawaken and resume its career if no sudden emergency threatens its security during its period of slumber. But this phase of sloth in the mental life of the Western World after 1918 coincided with the rapid development of such an as-

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sault upon the established order as history had never known before.

Our World of Ten Years Ago

Ten years ago the most acute intelligence might well have given that phase of world-wide dullness a long lease of life. There were troubles in most parts of the world, but none of them, seen apart, seemed more than the normal snoring, muttering and turning of our lethargic civilization. Peace on earth had been established for all time by the Kellogg Pact. All the nations of the world had renounced war as an instrument of policy and the Nobel peace prize had been awarded properly to Mr. Kellogg. Russia had entered the League of Nations and Mr. Litvinov—in the worst possible taste, one must admit—was taking the Kellogg Pact quite seriously and making proposals for drastic world disarmament. But that might be just his eager inexperience. The Stresemann regime had achieved its end and the last foot of German soil was free. The United States, under the uninspired sway of President Hoover, was having a certain trouble about overspeculation, and the great German banks were tottering. But who could guess at the ultimate repercussions of that?

There were great and increasing numbers of young people out of employment and very little prospect of any sort of life worth living. But nobody seemed to be doing anything very much about that.

That was our world of only ten years ago. Let us not forget that. And let us not forget how acquiescent we all were about it, we who mattered, how unwilling to face any fundamental reconstruction. Then, through this uninspiring spectacle of a false world peace, without aim or motive, the threat of a new war appeared. It appeared and grew plain and distinct and still the sleepers would not rouse themselves to face it.

It should, we now realize, have become more and more manifest to every intelligent observer that the mass of the pent-up youth of Germany was going mad under the contagious influence of a demented adventurer and that it was setting itself to break up this world of humdrum that had held it down. It should have been manifest, but who can claim to have measured its gravity?

There was a muttering that grew into an organized propaganda of revolt. Something of the sort had happened in Italy and had led to no worse result than a taming of the working classes and the torture of a few intellectuals and tiresome people of that quality. This German version of Fascism unfolded the most startling proposals, but these again could be discounted as the exuberance of a hopeful movement in its first crude enthusiasm. With an entirely German

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thoroughness and brutality it developed a system of concentration camps for Jews and intellectuals, it burned books and made war on modern art and there was nothing in that to disconcert Lord Halifax, the City and the British press peers. It seemed to them wholesome and not untimely.

It defied all the rules of military science in the warfare it was soon openly planning. It proposed to take every advantage, legitimate or illegitimate, against the victors of Versailles. And before it attacked it did its utmost to accentuate the social disintegration that had created its opportunity. It was acutely alive to the widening breach between the mean, ungenerous prosperous classes in our inert world and the frustrated accumulating multitudes of the unsuccessful and disadvantaged, a breach which nice people were doing their best to disregard. Upon this breach it worked with the utmost energy. To the prosperous it held out hopes of protection from Communism and spoliation. To the unprosperous, hope of adventure.

The persuasion that the Nazi might become the suitably appeased and hired bully of the prosperous and influential appealed very strongly to the new and inexperienced types of wealth everywhere. The discordance of these social elements had been destroying the national solidarity. This was as true of the British community as of any other Western state that had presently to face the berserk rush. For that was the second phase in the methodical German attack. First, the moral preparation that would enlist just as much of these conflicting factors as could be enlisted on the German side and then, before there could be any time to pull the threatened community together and cast out its traitors, came the swift, overwhelming offensive, the headlong, berserk rush. The German mind is soaked in the tradition of a sudden transition to frightfulness. The Teuton breaks into history with that familiar ire of his. The little towheaded children learn what is expected of them in their school primers. There is a sort of British lout who talks of seeing red as an excuse for violent, foul fighting, but in Germany that idea is systematic and fundamental.

In 1935 it was as plain as daylight what Germany was working up for and how Germany meant to do it. And yet in 1939 and until the Norwegian offensive we were still slackly disregarding this stupendous threat. It had faced us for the better part of seven years and still we were caught unawares. If ever a community deserved defeat it was the dull and evasive Great Britain of the spring of 1940.

The common Englishman is a stout fighter who laughs when he fights and

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despises the berserk style with all his heart. Yet twice in the first year of this war utter disaster stared us in the face—once after the treason of King Leopold and once after the dismal surrender of Pétain. And I do not think that any carping critic of history in the future will ever be able to deny that it is this indefatigable, versatile, imaginative Anglo-American, Winston Churchill, who has suddenly taken upon himself the very likeness of the legendary John Bull, who has saved the situation, who has awakened us and pulled the country together as no other human being could have done.

I do not know how close a record has been kept of his comings and goings when he was trying to hold up France before its collapse. Pulling together has been the essence of his task. By the very changes and fluctuations of his past career he has so wide a variety of contacts that he can rally the youngest Tories on his side, induce an angry country to be patient with its unimaginative older Tory members, put that incubus on its best behavior, convert Lord Beaverbrook from a disgruntled isolationist politician to a brilliant organizer of air victory, allay the suspicions of the labor leaders and postpone a disastrous social conflict. And this by no tact or diplomacy, no secret agreements and underhand understandings, but because he has always lived openly in all his changes and unorthodoxies.

We have to fight, he says, and that must override all other considerations. Not a very great discovery, you may say, but who else could have said it without provoking the reply: "Yes, but—"

He never "built up" his reputation for unqualified reality; it has grown up about him. He seems hardly aware of it, but it is the secret of his present power.

Democracy Owns Its Ministers

It is difficult to write of the achievements of a man who has become a cardinal figure in history and at the same time to recall the glimpses one has had of his daily life. Yet it is impossible for characters of great public importance to retain very much personal privacy. In a democratic community, particularly, it is necessary for the general mass of people to know as much as possible of the intimate lives of the men who are not in any sense the masters of their lives but rather the trusted, familiar, elder hands of the commonwealth in which we all have a share. A democracy owns its ministers. No workingman who discovered Winston going over a factory would dream of becoming awe-stricken and making a rigid salute of servility: "Heil, Winston!" But he would be im-

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mensely cheered. He would feel like backslapping his fellows, would probably shout "Good old Winston!"

None of us want to hand ourselves over to him. No one wants to make a sacred mystery of him. But we are most eager to know him and co-operate with him. And so it is legitimate to take a glimpse at his happy home life and the coming and going of his active family. They all seem to be keen on doing something. They all do as they please. There seems to be very little mutual criticism or character study among them and plainly they like one another very much. None of them seem to have had their minds formed for them or their careers chosen. Never have I known a family where there was less parental domination or more unmistakable and assured parental affection.

The house at Westerham is full of light. There is not a dull room in it. There is a studio in which Winston, when last I visited him, was painting a group of silver tea things, with Sir William Nicholson at hand to show him just what went wrong about it. The garden and grounds of Chartwell are full of evidence of how abundantly they are lived in. The tennis court and the swimming pool are very much alive. The grounds are littered with playthings of an incessant owner. There was a shallow pool with deep green shadows in which swam a number of golden carp. Close by was an easel with the fourth or fifth attempt of Winston to paint them. In the morning and evening he was working on his life of Marlborough. He painted in the afternoon and talked when there was a gap for talking. That is the sort of life the British prime minister leads at home when he is out of politics and, so to speak, doing nothing.

Through it all, tall and slender and graceful, smiling and serene, moves Mrs. Churchill, whose gray hair becomes her so well that you wonder whether she could possibly have been as handsome before it changed. The world knows little of her but it knows as much as she would have it know. She has none of that exhibitionism, that queer disposition to jostle for a share in the limelight, which is so often apparent in the wives of prominent men. She does not need to be reassured about herself.

That is my impression of our man and his circumstances. That is the daily life he was leading before this present war crisis. A critic who has looked over this manuscript asked: "Yes, but what is the daily life he is leading now?" The answer is that for a man who is holding a country together through a headlong war there is no daily life. Each day is different and each night. A man who wants to see all that is happening and know that it is going well must eat with a gunners' mess here, or get a sandwich

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in an airplane there, or dine with a group of politicians, or in a train, or not at all. He may have to sleep in an armchair or on a sack. Or he may snatch a few precious hours in a bed. And that is as much daily life as he has.

Years ago I wrote an attack upon him and Mr. Amery about some political affair or other and said they had still to grow up. It was a very good, true article. Since then they seem to have grown up considerably, though I doubt whether either of them will ever lose a certain quality of boyish animation. But it is only now that I realize the immense reserves of sagacity Churchill has accumulated since the hasty days of the Antwerp, Gallipoli and Archangel expeditions. Archangel was his crowning error, as he has long since admitted.

A Man for the Future

In all these adventures he showed the liveliest imagination and understanding of strategical essentials. And all of them miscarried for the same reason. He expected too much from his associates and subordinates. Each brilliant conception was let down. It was not so much disloyalty he encountered, though he has met with much real hatred and antagonism, as the "stickfool" element in our common nature, the self-protective unwillingness from which he himself is so comparatively free. And the remarkable fact about this present phase in his career is the evidence of a new shrewdness and wariness and of an unwonted self-control. He has pulled himself together. He is pulling us all together.

I will confess I have never felt so disposed to stand by a man through thick and thin as I do now in regard to him. And I think that, in writing that, I write for a very great number of my fellow countrymen who have hitherto felt frustrated and fragmentary amidst the rush of events.

A renascent Britain may crystallize about him. And that brings us to the last question: What will be his role in the next few years? He is a young man of sixty-five when so many people are old. He is experienced enough to be wise now and young enough to be energetic. He is likely to be the dominant and representative figure in British affairs for a dozen years or more so that to discuss his future is to discuss the world outlook.

I am writing now at one o'clock in the morning at my desk in London behind closed and barred shutters, and outside the antiaircraft barrage is banging away and there has been a high-explosive bomb I should think a terrace or so away. I happened to see it fall. I was taking a look around outside then and the concussion and the spouting black uprush was very impressive—if it has got

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upper Baker Street it may make the papers and letters late tomorrow. London in the last few weeks has suffered a lot of this sort of thing. There are scars everywhere, and yet it is remarkable how little London has suffered. Some of its injuries are wholesome. There has been a great destruction but no very great loss of life in the East End slums. That filthy sprawl of mean house property will never return. The evacuated people will have to be quartered in the basements of the large, solid houses in the West End which our rich people in search of economy and personal security have left empty. That foreshadows the problems ahead of us.

The Real Test of Churchill

The capital remains cheerfully pugnacious. It can endure this sort of thing ad infinitum. The day before yesterday Goering lost 187 planes in his raids on London and the countryside is littered with his planes. Some came down intact and surrendered. London is convinced that "Jerry"—they will say "Jerry" and not "Our terrible foe"—is near the end of his tether. They want him to get on with his invasion now and finish himself altogether. Then they will want to counterattack.

Winston Churchill will want to counterattack. And that will be the phase that will try him and Britain out, because then the breach which he has pulled together for a time between the dull, conservative elements that have dominated our British life so dreadfully for thirty-odd years and the creative forces of the English-speaking world will reopen. The former will set themselves with the obstinacy of mules to bring about some idiot pacification, some apparent restoration of the old order that will make a fresh world catastrophe inevitable in a few years' time. The latter will insist on a conclusive defeat of Germany leading to such a world settlement as will end this foolery of air war forever.

For that settlement nothing more and nothing less than the honest co-operation of the United States, Russia and Great Britain is necessary; and for the counterattack that must prepare the way for that settlement, such a reorganization of those antiquated and disastrous organs, the British foreign office and war office, as will release the still-hampered energy of our people and of the stifled and betrayed French, Czech and other subjugated nations to its full possibilities.

Of our prime minister's disposition and determination to carry this war to an entirely conclusive end there can be no question. The more uncertain issue is his ability under the immediate pressures of this warfare and the ability of those his personal magnetism will gather

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about him to apprehend and solve the far more intricate and difficult riddles of the postwar reconstruction. That is why I for one would welcome the development of any movement in America to understand and co-operate with the renascent Britain that Churchill represents. Like any other statesman, he cannot go far beyond his effective backing. But with an effective backing I believe he will go as far as anyone can do toward the restoration of sanity to the world.

