

## Tom Igoe on *The Splendid and the Vile*, by Erik Larson

*This book is a highly engaging and close-up narrative, based on personal diaries, correspondence, other written records and interviews, of life among the members of the Churchill family and their entourage from the time of Churchill's elevation to Prime Minister in May 1940 to the most brutal bombing attack on the City of London in May 1941. This was a critical one-year period of the War during which the leadership and fighting forces of Britain, evidenced by the courage and tenacity of the PM and the RAF, held on against Germany and convinced President Roosevelt, and his key advisors, Harry Hopkins and Averell Harriman, that, with strong support from the US, the tide could be turned against the German war machine. The central question the author sought to answer was this: "how did the Churchills and their circle cope?"*

*In this context, the Sources and Acknowledgements section is revealing. Given the massive amount of materials available for review, Larson began mapping his narrative, using the so-called Vonnegut curve, a graphic device conceived by Kurt Vonnegut in his rejected master's thesis at University of Chicago. It provides a schema for analyzing every story ever written, whether fiction or non-fiction. A vertical axis represents the continuum from good fortune to bad, with good at the top and bad at the bottom. The horizontal axis represents the passage of time. One of the story types that Vonnegut isolated was the "Man in the hole," in which the hero experiences great fortune, then deep misfortune, before climbing up to achieve even greater success. Larson determined that this was a pretty good representation of Churchill's first year as PM.*

*When the author began his research, he looked for stories that often got left out of the massive Churchill biographies, either because there was not enough time and space to tell them or because they might have seemed frivolous. But Larson determined that it is in frivolity that Churchill often revealed himself, the little moments that endeared him to his staff, despite extreme demands he place on all.*

*Larson also tried to bring to the foreground characters often given secondary treatment in the big histories. For example, while every Churchill scholar had quoted diaries of John Colville as a peripheral player during this time, Larson*

*treated him as a main character in his own right, describing his romances and strongly emerging desire to become an RAF pilot. Mary Churchill also steps forward. At the time, she presented as an apparently frivolous 18 year-old girl who loved a good RAF dance and thrilled at the practice of “beating up” when pilots would buzz her and her friends at treetop level. Yet she loved her father very much and longed for the opportunity to play an important part in the War.*

*This book is also about the ability of Churchill to move mountains, based not only on his dogged approach to the task of preserving Britain but also upon his ability to summon up the most glorious speeches and off-the-cuff remarks to inspire a nation.*

*My particular observations follow.*

- John “Jock” Colville became the valued private secretary to the PM; he was educated at Harrow and moved on to Trinity College, Cambridge. Harrow had an outsized influence on the young men of Britain’s upper classes, with its roster of graduates including seven prime ministers and various actors, including Benedict Cumberbatch and Cary Elwes.
- In his first speech as PM, as the British forces were fleeing to Dunkirk on the coast, he set a pattern that he followed throughout the war, offering a sober appraisal of facts, tempered with reason and optimism: “It would be foolish to disguise the gravity of the hour. It would be still more foolish to lose heart and courage.” He continued: “After this battle in France abates its force, there will come the battle for our Islands, for all that Britain is and all that Britain means. In that supreme emergency, we shall not hesitate to take every step – even the most drastic – to call forth from our people the last ounce and inch of effort of which they are capable.”
- With the British forces in France on the run, Hitler, upon advice of one of his trusted senior generals, ordered his armored divisions to halt their advance, to give his tanks and crews a chance to regroup before a further planned advance to the south. The halt order, which perplexed both British and German commanders, gave the British a life-saving pause and proved to be a “fatal error.”

- On the eve of the escape from Dunkirk (amid the uncertainty of how many troops could ultimately be saved), Churchill rallied the members of Parliament with a stirring speech in which he conceded that he had briefly considered, and then dismissed, negotiating a peace deal with Germany and intoned: “I am convinced that every man of you would rise up and tear me down from my place if I were for one moment to contemplate parley or surrender. If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground.” In this speech, Churchill demonstrated a knack, repeated time and again, for making people feel loftier, stronger and more courageous. As it turned out, 338,000 men got away and another 120,000 who still remained in France were making their way toward other evacuation points along the coast.
- And on June 4, Churchill gave one of his most memorable speeches in the House of Commons: “....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 –”. And on June 18, anticipating the German attack on the island, Churchill appealed to Britons everywhere: “....Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Commonwealth and Empire lasts for a thousand years, men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour.’”
- With the fall of France and the British evacuation of Dunkirk, Hitler, in July, requested a thorough analysis of a full-scale invasion of England. By this time, Hitler assumed that England, one way or another, would withdraw from the war, and he displayed little apparent interest in pursuing an invasion, based on concerns about the difficulty of that challenge, with particular concerns over the adequacy of German naval strength.

Viewing the war as all but over in the West, Hitler order the demobilization of 40 Wehrmacht divisions – 25% of his army – this proved to be a strategic error.

- Operation Sea Lion, which envisioned a full-on naval assault by 1600 German vessels across the Channel, never happened, in large part because the vaunted Luftwaffe was unable to destroy the pesky RAF. Identifying the objectives to be achieved before invasion could begin, Hitler stated: “The English Air Force must be so reduced morally and physically that it is unable to deliver any significant attack against the German crossing.”
- The “Battle of Britain” pitted the first-line fighters of both sides against each other – the forces were more or less evenly matched, each having distinguishing attributes: the Spitfires and Hurricanes were more heavily armed and more maneuverable, while the Messerschmitt Me 109 performed better at higher altitudes and carried more protective armor. The Spitfire had 8 machine guns, the Me 109 only two, but it also had two cannons that fired exploding shells. All three fighters were mono-wing, single-engine planes capable of flying over 300 mph – but all had the same limitation: their fuel capacity gave them only 90 minutes of flying time, barely enough for the Germans to get to London and back. Overall, the Messerschmitt was considered to be the better aircraft, and German pilots had more experience in aerial combat and were older than the Brit pilots (26 v 20).

As for flight time limitations, this issue became critical. While German bombers could fly for longer periods, they required fighter protection. Once the fighters had to return, the bombers could not risk flying without protection and had to return as well. These limitations became more and more of a disadvantage to the Germans.

- As a leader, Churchill instructed his advisors to issue brief reports, outlining the key points and adding appendices as necessary. Brevity, clarity, short, crisp paragraphs.
- Culturally, during the war, the importance of tea became apparent. Tea underpinned morale, acquired magical importance and cheered people up in a time of crisis. Tea was comfort and history, and above all was English. Churchill himself didn’t drink it, preferring whiskey and water.

- Visiting a group of dispirited people viewing the bombed remains in the East End, one of them hollered to the PM, “When are we going to bomb Berlin, Winnie?” Churchill whirled, shook his fist and walking stick, and snarled, “You leave that to me!” This changed the mood of the crowd abruptly, raising their spirits and reassuring them.
- Lord Beaverbrook’s role was characterized as critical, both as to organizing and driving the production of aircraft and serving as one of Churchill’s friends, confidants and key advisors. He cleverly restructured Britain’s aircraft manufacturing industry such that operations were spread over a myriad of locations in order to reduce concentration of facilities that could expose the nation’s production capabilities to major destruction by German bombers.
- Notwithstanding its many massive sorties over Britain, the Luftwaffe failed to destroy the RAF. The strength of the German Air Force in relation to the RAF was roughly 4 to 3 by November 1940. The two air forces did not differ much in strength, the main variance being in the number of long-range bombers. The RAF fought better and with more urgency than might have been the case if it had shared the relative complacency of the Luftwaffe, which believed itself to be far superior.
- In the end, London endured. Between September 1940 and May 1941, when the Blitz came to an end, nearly 29000 citizens were killed and an equal number seriously injured. Throughout the UK, the total civilian deaths in 1940 and 1941 reach almost 45000, with another 52000 injured.
- Among the vignettes included in the book, the story of Harry Hopkins’s time with the PM was the most interesting to me. I loved his response to the PM on what he was going to say to Roosevelt upon his return to the US, quoting the from the Book of Ruth: “Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God....Even to the end.”

*Post-script about the main characters:*

1. Mary Churchill, the so-called “country mouse,” became an anti-aircraft gunner and found herself in command of 230 female volunteers. “Not so bad at 21!” noted the proud PM.
2. John “Jock” Colville, after repeated requests and fitted with special contact lenses, became an RAF pilot, flying American-made Mustangs and conducting 40 sorties over the French coast in reconnaissance missions around the time of the D-Day invasion of the Continent. After the War, he became Private Secretary to Princess Elizabeth for a time, marrying one of the Princess’s ladies-in-waiting.
3. Lord Beaverbrook, exhausted and burdened with health problems, retired from government service in 1942. He had succeeded in doubling the British fighter output in the first three months of his tenure as Minister of Aircraft Production. He was widely perceived to be a very difficult personality, and his numerous threats to resign his post were a clever tactic to enable him to maintain firm control over the production of aircraft and all the processes that supported that massive effort.

During his service, Beaverbrook stood by the PM to provide the kind of counsel and good humor that helped sustain the PM during the challenging early period of the War. Beaverbrook remained a good friend and unofficial adviser to the PM following his departure from government.

4. The Prof/Lindemann (the scientist) and the PM remained friends throughout the War.
5. Having been engaged in an amorous relationship in London, Pamela Churchill and Averell Harriman married years later and had 15 years together until Averell’s death in 1986.

6. Goring was sentenced to die in October 1946. He committed suicide the night before his execution.
  7. Goebbels and his wife poisoned themselves and their children on May 1, 1945.
  8. Hitler killed himself the day before.
  9. Rudolf Hess (#3) was sentenced to life in prison. He committed suicide in August 1987, having spent years in Spandau Prison along with a dozen other German officials.
- The war in Europe ended on May 8, 1945. Two months later, the British public voted the Conservative Party out of power, forcing Churchill's resignation. He seemed the ideal man to run a war, less so to guide the recovery.

***Personal Footnote:*** The story of the Ampleforth train tragedy was of particular interest to me. About 100 school boys were returning to Ampleforth College, a highly regarded preparatory school run by Benedictine monks. Some of the boys, apparently bored, began flicking lighted matches at each other. One match fell between a seat and a wall and caused a massive fire that killed six and wounded seven. Two of the dead were sons of the Belgian PM.

I wondered, at the time I read the book, whether any of the surviving boys might have later become teachers at the Priory, a preparatory school in St. Louis, MO that I attended from 1959 to 1965. The Priory was founded by these Ampleforth Benedictines, many of whom had received their early education at Ampleforth, survived the War and returned to life-long service in this monastic community.

Upon recent inquiry, I learned that one of the survivors was a boy by the name of Luke Rigby. Known to me as "Father Luke," he returned to Ampleforth to become a Benedictine Monk and thereafter made his way to the Priory in St. Louis,

becoming the Abbot and long-time leader of the Priory's religious community.  
Father Luke never mentioned to me his devastating experience during the war.

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