
CHURCHILL, THE BYLINE YEARS

Before politics, Winston Churchill's early-life adventures turned him into a multimedia star

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Speak the name Winston Churchill and you conjure up images of the larger-than-life British war leader, a master of wit and oratory, with his eccentric all-in-one zipper suits and his omnipresent cigars. But the Churchill of 1940 was the product of an already extraordinary life and career. He first burst onto the world scene in the dying years of the 19th century, and it was as a young man that he acquired the power of words and learned how to use his writing to advance his career and his causes and to manage his image and reputation.

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From 1895 to 1900 Churchill saw action as a young cavalry officer. He came under fire on his 21st birthday while accompanying Spanish forces in Cuba against local guerrillas; he rode against the Pathans in what is now Afghanistan; he charged with the 21st Lancers against Dervish warriors at the battle of Omdurman in the Sudan; and, having been captured by the Boers in South Africa, he made a daring escape and then rode into liberated Ladysmith with the South African Light Horse Regiment.

Yet what is perhaps often overlooked is that he had two careers during these years. He was not just a soldier; he was also a war correspondent. Moreover, you could argue that it was as a journalist that he was most successful.

Promotion in the Victorian army was a slow process, and Churchill left the army holding much the same rank as when he entered it: as a junior officer in a cavalry regiment. But during the same period, his earnings as a special correspondent increased tenfold. In 1895 he received just 25 guineas, about £1,500 (\$2,400) in today's money, for five articles in the *Daily Graphic* on his accounts of his exploits in Cuba. By 1899 the *Morning Post* was prepared to pay him a staggering £250 a month, the equivalent today of more than £14,000 (\$23,000) per month, with all expenses paid, to cover the Boer War in South Africa.

In his autobiographical memoir, *My Early Life*, Churchill tends to downplay this side of his activities. He chooses to emphasize the young man of action above the young man

of letters. To the contrary, the two developed side by side and fed off one another. It was in this period that Churchill developed the dual system that was to serve him so well throughout his political life; of being both a leading participant in events, and a leading commentator and chronicler of those same events. He made the news by writing it, while also ensuring that he made the headlines.

Churchill had a talent and enthusiasm for writing. In *My Early Life* he claimed that he owed his mastery of English to the fact that he was so bad at other school subjects, and therefore remained so long in the lowest form that he only studied English.

What he perhaps lacked at school was the motivation to take up his pen. The death of his father in January 1895, at just 45, provided a catalyst. Churchill suddenly found himself at the head of the family. In the spirit of the age in which he lived, with the advent of motor cars and airplanes, he was now a young man in a hurry; determined, as he wrote to his mother in August 1896, to "beat my sword into an iron dispatch box," and to enter politics, stating that, "It is useless to preach the gospel of patience to me. Others as young are making the running now and what chance have I of ever catching up?"

He may have admitted in another letter to his mother, "As Dr Johnson says, 'No-one but a blockhead ever wrote except for money,'" but it is clear that ambition was his primary motivation. In an age when politicians were not yet salaried, he needed an independent income to fund a political career, and he needed to make his own name in order to make himself electable. It was his journalism that was to provide both, enabling him to capitalize on his army experience while also freeing him from the constraints of the young cavalry officer's pay.

It was a policy that was not without risk. Young British officers were supposed to do their duty. They were not supposed to engage in self-promotion, especially when that meant leaving their regiment at any excuse to try and find attachment on the front line, or when such action resulted in unapproved dispatches that could be seen as critical of aspects of the British military command. But Churchill now had a plan and was not to be diverted. In 1897 he did not wait on events but took the initiative; returning early from leave to his regiment in India, he made an arduous five-day train journey from Bangalore to join the Malakand Field Force, on what is now the Afghan frontier, with no guarantee of an army vacancy awaiting him. In such actions, travelling thousands of miles and risking the wrath of superiors, we can see the lengths that Churchill was prepared to go to in order to make his own luck.

Churchill took risks, but they were calculated risks, intended to serve his longer game. His contemporary letters capture this faith in his own abilities, demonstrating an enthusiasm and ambition married with personal bravery. On September 19, 1897, he wrote to his mother describing his encounters with the Pathans: "I rode on my grey pony all along the skirmish line where everyone else was lying down in cover. Foolish perhaps, but I play for high stakes and given an audience there is no act too daring or too noble. Without the gallery things are different."

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1. Signed photograph of Churchill as a young politician, c1905
2. "The Armoured Train Disaster Near Estcourt. During a perfect hail of Mauser bullets Mr Winston Churchill gallantly brings in the wounded." Cartoon of Churchill at the scene of an armoured train ambush, 1899

Images courtesy of Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge

Equally important as these physical risks were the intellectual risks that Churchill took in writing up his adventures. The aim was the same: to get him noticed by as large an audience as possible. But it was not easy. The convention of the time, given that he was a serving officer, meant that his early dispatches were not issued under his own name, but rather credited as "From our own correspondent," or bylined "by a young officer." By 1897, Churchill had had enough of such convention, writing to his mother and expressing the strong view that his articles should be signed by him, "as otherwise I get no credit for the letters. It may help me politically to come before the public in this way." It was this desire not just to write, but to be known, to play to the gallery, that led him to turn his dispatches into books.

The high point of Churchill's career as a reporter came in 1899 with the Boer War. This might not have been clear to Churchill at the time. He had left the army in the hope of being elected as a Member of Parliament, but had lost the by-election, suffering the first major setback in his early career. To him a position with the *Morning Post* covering the hostilities against the Boer republics must at first have seemed a retrograde step. With hindsight, however, it quickly looked as though the previous five years had been leading up to this moment. Out of the army, he was now free to write what he wanted, and more importantly he would have his name attached to anything he wrote.

Similarly, what could have been an insurmountable disaster, when his train was ambushed and he was captured by the enemy, turned out to be the defining moment of his early life. Having taken the initiative and made his escape, he showed skill and genius for exploiting it. By the time of his triumphal arrival in Durban, he had already produced the first account of his great adventure, including the lines, "Of course, I am a man of peace. I do not fight. But swords are not the only weapons in the world. Something may be done with a pen."

Churchill was widely quoted by the international press, and showed a great ability to capture the mood of the moment and to give great copy, saying, "I am very weak but I am free. I have lost many pounds in weight, but I am lighter in heart." His article about his escape was syndicated around the world. In a strategy more associated with modern prime ministers and presidents, it led to both a book and to lecture tours of the UK and of North America. But more than that, these words were the opening shots in his second bid to enter Parliament, and this time he was guaranteed success. He was still only 25 years old.

Through his own writing, and through his use of the press, Churchill had placed himself firmly in control of the narrative. It was a system that would continue to serve him well. 🇬🇧

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CHURCHILL: THE POWER OF WORDS

This summer, a new exhibition at the Morgan Library in New York, (June 8 to September 23) will explore the brilliance of Churchill's writings and speeches.

Churchill's impact on the 20th century is difficult to overestimate. The exhibition will explore his use of spoken and written language – from his poignant Victorian childhood letters to his parents, to Cold War correspondence with President Eisenhower, and will feature some of his most famous wartime oratory. It will focus on how he used the written and spoken word to develop, complement and advance his political career. It may not be well remembered that Churchill won a Nobel Prize for Literature. But words were his lasting monument.

The "special relationship" that exists between the US and Britain was rooted in Churchill's own very special personal connection to the country of his mother's birth. The US was also where Churchill found the most influential political tutor of his early years, William Bourke Cockran, a prominent New York politician and friend of his mother. It was also in the US, as a young adventurer, author and parliamentarian, that Churchill made a fortune on the lecture circuit.

www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/