

Churchill and His Airmen: Relationships, Intrigue and Policy Making 1914-1945

by Vincent Orange

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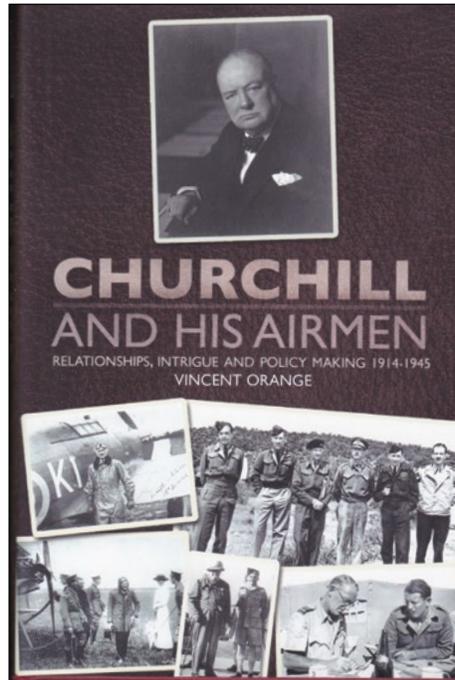
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Reviewed by
Randall Wakelam

In the first days of August 2016, both Canada’s retiring and incoming Vice Chief of Defence Staff commented that there was too much interference from politicians in the conduct of military affairs.¹ Readers of *The Toronto Star* article might wonder how indeed government, both politicians and bureaucrats, interact with members of their armed services. How appropriate then to look at the experiences of the Royal Air Force, the world’s first independent air service, through the lens of one of the last century’s great political figures, Sir Winston Churchill.

Author Vincent Orange set out to do just that, covering Churchill’s relationship with British air power, from the technical to the strategic. The association was a long one, extending beyond the period identified in the book’s title, and many readers will be intrigued to learn that Churchill saw the potential of air power well before the opening volleys of the Great War, gaining some first-hand flying experience in 1909, while at the same time, foreseeing the potential threat to Britain. For those more familiar with air power than with high-level politics, an exposure to both Churchill and the complex and sometimes chaotic circumstances of Parliament and Cabinet can be enlightening. Churchill was first elected to the British House of Commons in 1900 and held a number of cabinet positions before becoming the First Lord of the Admiralty, in other words, the minister responsible for the Royal Navy, from 1911. In that post, he set about modernizing the Royal Navy, including pushing the development of aircraft, both dirigibles and aeroplanes. Churchill, ever the man of action, was a key proponent of the Dardanelles campaign in 1915, which led to the disasters at Gallipoli and saw him leave his seat in Parliament to spend several months commanding an army battalion on the Western Front. Returning to the Commons late in 1916, he was appointed Minister of Munitions, a thankless job as Britain scrambled through much of the war to produce sufficient munitions of reliable quality, not the least of these aircraft and aero engines.

As the war ended, Churchill was named Minister of War and also Secretary of State for Air, and it was his doing within Cabinet that secured the initial footing for the nascent Royal Air



Force (RAF) to continue on in peacetime as an independent air arm. But supporter of the RAF or not, he was equally forced by national circumstances to sponsor what was called the ‘Ten Year Rule,’ which postulated that Britain would not be involved in a major conflict for the following decade, and thus, could keep defence spending to a minimum. Each year the geopolitical scene could be reassessed, and the ten year period restarted. It was not until the menace of Hitler was upon Europe in 1933 that defence spending witnessed growth. From 1924 to 1929, Churchill served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, in other words, the minister of finance, and here he fought hard to curb military spending. Out of favour with Conservative leadership during the whole of the 1930s, Churchill nonetheless kept himself informed with many defence developments, including those in air force and technological circles.

The Churchill most readers will know reasonably well was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945. During that period, he led bravely, but not without dabbling in things he might better have left to his military leaders. We see this in Orange’s discussion of the Battle of Britain, the Norwegian campaign of the same year, and his involvement in other longer campaigns, such as the Battle of the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and North West Europe campaigns, and the strategic bombing campaign. We also see that he was disinterested, for the most part, in events occurring in South East Asia.

During these decades Churchill had dealings with many of the top men in the British flying services, agreeing with some, disagreeing with others, and, as was the case in much of his political life, wanting to impose certain of his ideas, be they sound or not. This interaction between government and the air force, between leaders in both organizations, is what Professor Orange set out to describe in his volume, but unfortunately, he did not in many ways meet his goal. Before turning to the limitations of the book, it must be noted that the author passed away in 2012, and that Grub Street published his work the following year without the benefit of an intended final edit by the author.

What readers will find, as a result, is a work which, on the whole, flows chronologically chapter by chapter, but at the same time suffers from areas where there is confusion and duplication. There is also, it appears, a degree of rough cutting and pasting of ideas, as almost every chapter seems to lack a unified theme. The chapters are loaded with section headings that attempt to signal a change of topic, but discussion within sections often does not relate to the title. In the most frustrating cases, there are sections consisting of just one short paragraph. And almost never do the chapters have an introduction or a conclusion. The problem of theme, or thesis, starts from the first page, where Orange offers no thesis or purpose for the book, but simply begins the narrative of Churchill’s dealings with aircraft, air power, and airmen. Only in

BOOK REVIEWS

a very short conclusion do we get some sense that Orange wanted to address Churchill's strengths and weaknesses in relation to senior air commanders and air power policy.

Equally frustrating is Orange's apparent decision, according to the publisher's statement, "...that the text be published without footnotes, to make it more easily accessible to the general reader."² How lack of sources might achieve this is a bit of a mystery. Instead, the author makes passing mention of various writers, but not in a way that the general reader will know to whom he is referring, and he uses the occasional set of single quotes. This lack of 'fine-tuning' also plays out in other areas, where there are gaps in the index and where errors or omissions of fact appear. In one instance, Orange, born in Britain but living in New Zealand for decades, mentions the nations, including Australia and New Zealand, contributing flyers to Fighter Command in 1940 without any recognition of the part played by Canada.³ In another place, Orange discusses the use of operational research in Bomber Command, mentioning Wakelam but not including the book by Wakelam in his bibliography.⁴ In a third example, Orange discusses at some length Wing Commander Charles Anderson, whom, Orange states, was "...perhaps the most important of those RAF officers who communicated regularly with Churchill in the 1930s...." There is no listing of Anderson in the index, and

we only get a thumbnail sketch of him and his service in the last paragraph of the section.⁵

While the book has serious limitations, Professor Orange set for himself an important task as his ultimate project. That he fell short of his goal through ill health and eventually death should in no way diminish our recognition of the potential of this volume.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, *The Toronto Star*, at <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/08/05/lt-gen-guy-thibault-slams-level-of-bureaucratic-involvement-in-military.html>, accessed 6 August 2016.
2. P. 6.
3. P. 145.
4. Wakelam, as it turns out, is the current reviewer, and the book, *The Science of Bombing*, is not identified. How then can the general reader explore this topic more should she/he be so inclined?
5. P. 102.