



**Steven Fielding, Bill Schwarz and Richard Toye, *The Churchill Myths* (Oxford University Press, 2020).**

*Source: Midlands Historical Review, Book Review*

**Published: 28/07/2021**

**URL:**

**<http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/steven-fielding-bill-schwarz-and-richard-toye-the-churchill-myths/>**

## Steven Fielding, Bill Schwarz and Richard Toye, *The Churchill Myths* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Alex Riggs

### Abstract

This article reviews *The Churchill Myths*, co-authored by Steven Fielding, Professor of Political History at the University of Nottingham, Bill Schwarz, Professor of English at Queen Mary University of London, and Richard Toye, Professor of History at the University of Exeter. The book follows the trajectory of Winston Churchill's uses in the popular memory of the post-war period, suggesting that the legends of 1940 have remained a central element throughout, but also tracking the changing nature of elements around these stories, such as a greater attention to his personal character. Although the authors make a convincing case in many respects, it leaves some significant aspects of competing 'Churchill myths' and change over time underexplored.

**Key words:** American politics, Brexit, British politics, Conservative Party, Cold War, film, India, memory, Second World War, Wales, Winston Churchill.

### Biography

Alex Riggs is a University of Nottingham PhD History student, funded by Midlands4Cities. His research focuses on the 1970s and 1980s American left, especially their efforts to forge coalitions through electoral and grassroots politics.

A spectre is haunting Britain. The spectre of Winston Churchill. That's the argument of Steven Fielding, Bill Schwarz and Richard Toye in *The Churchill Myths*. Certainly, any follower of British politics will need little convincing of Churchill's continued relevance. As the authors point out in the book's key rationale, Churchill has been deployed constantly in the debates around Brexit. Most prominently, Brexiteers have deployed an advocate for a 'global Britain' that confronted a German-dominated Europe, but Remainers too have cast him as a pro-European concerned with the implications of Britain cutting adrift from the continent.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the period since the book's finalisation propelled Churchill even further into the centre of political discourse, with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic and global Black Lives Matter protests all prompting further discussion of his legacy.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Fielding, Schwarz and Toye bring the subject necessary scholarly attention.

As they stress, the book's subject is not Winston Churchill. It is about memory of him,

'the many, contrary manifestations of the various Churchill legends *and* the common, invariant properties which make the range of individual stories recognisably instalments in a common process of codification, resulting in Churchill as myth' (Emphasis original).<sup>3</sup>

This history is uncovered across three chapters. The first, 'Brexit May 1940', tackles Churchill's political uses, highlighting his utility for a range of political actors in various conflicts and crises, from the Cold War to Brexit. The next, 'The Churchill

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Fielding, B. Schwarz and R. Toye, *The Churchill Myths* (Oxford, 2020), pp.8-9.

<sup>2</sup> N. Carter, 'This is the moment to learn the wartime generation's lesson', *The Times*, May 8, 2020, p.5; P. Walker, 'Boris Johnson says removing statues is to 'lie about our history'',

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jun/12/boris-johnson-says-removing-statue-s-is-to-lie-about-our-history-george-floyd>, accessed 30/03/2021.

<sup>3</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, p.11.

Syndrome’, goes over similar ground, again exploring the evolution of his British and American political deployments. It also introduces interesting theoretical concepts, particularly ‘reputational entrepreneurship’, whereby self-interested custodians use particular memories to build a sense of solidarity within communities by defining what they are for and against. This is linked with the concept of a ‘resonant core’ to memories that is always present, whose surroundings are constantly changing over time.<sup>4</sup> This represents important overlap with the ideas of the political theorist Michael Freeden, whose morphological approach to ideology similarly uncovers core concepts, but suggests significant fluctuations in the peripheral concepts that surround its centre over time.<sup>5</sup> Finally, ‘Persistence and Change in Churchill’s Mythic Memory’ is largely focused on dramatic depictions, highlighting the battles that Hollywood producers had with Churchill and his aides to get a biographical treatment to the big screen and his numerous depictions ever since.<sup>6</sup>

The authors convincingly show how the Churchill myths’ adaptability has kept them relevant through the post-war era. They highlight how the myth of an unshakable Churchill arose from early Cold War fears about Soviet expansionism. This was embraced by a diverse range of figures including liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who praised his rhetorical ability ‘to give shape and character, colour and direction and coherence to the stream of events’, something essential for democracy to survive in this context.<sup>7</sup> Then as fears of national decline grew in the 1960s, Churchill became a symbol of Britain’s lost might. In the context of fears around the decline of Britain’s Empire, economy and culture, conservative commentators like the historian John Lukacs portrayed his death in 1965 as the simultaneous passing of the hierarchical, traditional society that sustained its great power status.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, *The Churchill Factor*, written by perhaps Churchill’s most enthusiastic

---

<sup>4</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.72-73.

<sup>5</sup> M. Freeden, ‘The Morphological Analysis of Ideology’, in M. Freeden, L. Tower Sargent and M. Stears (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford, 2013), pp.124-25.

<sup>6</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.143-44.

<sup>7</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.40-41.

<sup>8</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.35-36.

‘reputational entrepreneur’ Boris Johnson, depicted him as an anti-establishment figure, taking a meek, out-of-touch political elite to task for their belief in the limits of national power and using his rhetorical might to restore national esteem.<sup>9</sup> The authors suggest that in the age of Brexit’s political deadlocks, Johnson’s narrative of a ‘man of destiny’ smashing through national malaise has become dominant over popular views of Britain’s wartime leader.<sup>10</sup>

In making these arguments, the authors deploy an impressive range of material. Given the abundance of Churchill films, this medium is particularly prominent, especially 2018’s *The Darkest Hour*. These dramatic depictions are effective in evidencing the centrality of 1940 to Churchillian memory, with this a consistent element throughout- even 1972’s *Young Winston*, based on Churchill’s first autobiography, *My Early Life*, treats events decades before the war as foreshadowing his future greatness.<sup>11</sup> This medium also functions effectively in showing the changes that have occurred around this myth. Richard Burton’s 1974 portrayal presented a stoic individual, but his more recent biopics celebrate his eccentricities, presenting his tempestuousness and bouts of depression as representative of his humanity, in contrast to the distant, stuffy Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax.<sup>12</sup> Political opinion is also drawn upon, including interventions from figures as diverse as John F. Kennedy, Margaret Thatcher and Nigel Farage, providing a good range of popular and elite discourses and showing his constant utility in the post-war period.<sup>13</sup>

*The Churchill Myths* also reveals some of the key silences in these depictions. In pinpointing the 1940 fixation of these sources, the authors highlight a contradiction in conventional attitudes- on the one hand, Churchill is the man of destiny, singlehandedly steering Britain away from defeat in 1940. Yet on the other, he

---

<sup>9</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, p.23.

<sup>10</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.27-28.

<sup>11</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.125,138

<sup>12</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.139-40.

<sup>13</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.9-10,79-80,84-85

appears to have been incapable of deploying these talents at any other moment, with his decades of ministerial office before and after the war rarely invoked, and practically irrelevant to the war once the United States and Soviet Union joined the conflict in 1941.<sup>14</sup> This means that a series of events that challenge his status as a unifying national hero, including but not limited to, his sending of troops to quell striking miners in South Wales as Home Secretary, his staunch support for imperialism, and his 1945 election defeat, are either glossed over or unexplained.<sup>15</sup> Even when they are mentioned, such as his pro-Empire intervention in the debate on Indian home rule in the 2002 film *The Gathering Storm*, they represent his honesty compared to the devious Conservative leadership, not his unrelenting imperialism.<sup>16</sup>

However, this point also reveals one of the book's flaws. Although the authors are correct in highlighting 1940 as the central Churchillian myth, these silences are by no means universal. Directors may not be rushing to dramatize Churchill's role in the Tonypandy riots, but his actions still have an important impact on memory of him in South Wales.<sup>17</sup> On a global scale too, the 1943 Bengal Famine has shaped Indian memory of Churchill, with the exacerbation of mass starvation by his wartime policies also fuelling a more critical history, and crucially one not centring on 1940.<sup>18</sup> These critiques make passing visits to the narrative, mentioned in criticisms from John McDonnell and Richard Burton, but a more detailed sense of how they fit within an analysis of the Churchill myths or why they have sprung up in particular contexts is not included.<sup>19</sup> Had they been, *The Churchill Myths* would have produced a more comprehensive analysis, one that highlights the plurality of memories implied by its title.

---

<sup>14</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.111-12.

<sup>15</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.122-24.

<sup>16</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.133-34.

<sup>17</sup> 'Has the town of Tonypandy forgiven Winston Churchill? | ITV News', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhYQ13z4dYc>, accessed 01/04/2021.

<sup>18</sup> Y. Limaye, 'Churchill's legacy leaves Indians questioning his hero status', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-53405121>, accessed 01/04/2021.

<sup>19</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.69-70,108-09.

A closer analysis of these silences could have also brought further insights into the moments when Churchill is more obscure in political discourse. For instance, it is mentioned that John Major made little use of Churchill during his premiership and that no Churchill films were made between 1982 and 2002 and again between 2004 and 2017, yet no explanations are offered for why this was the case.<sup>20</sup> A more nuanced analysis of Churchill's American deployments would have also been possible through this approach. Though the authors correctly highlight his use by all post-war American presidents, a search of Presidential public papers reveals that this has been far from equal over time. For instance, Jimmy Carter invoked Churchill thirteen times, but his successor Ronald Reagan found 125 occasions to quote the former Prime Minister.<sup>21</sup> Through closer examination of these deployments, a clearer understanding of why Churchill was especially useful for certain actors and less so for others could be achieved, with Reagan's confrontational policy towards the Soviet Union making Churchill's warnings over appeasement and post-war Soviet ambitions convenient.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the defection of many Southern Democrats to the Republican Party also meant Churchillian wisdom about the merits of switching parties was applicable.<sup>23</sup>

Patrick Finney's *Remembering the Road to World War Two* provides a useful example of this approach. Focusing on the historiography of appeasement, Finney situates historians' work within the various contexts they were writing in, contrasting the critical outlook of the immediate post-war years of high confidence in Britain's great power status with the more sympathetic view of the declinist 1960s and '70s,

---

<sup>20</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.86,138.

<sup>21</sup> 'Advanced Search',

[https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search?field-keywords=Churchill&field-keywords2=&field-keywords3=&from%5Bdate%5D=01-01-1961&to%5Bdate%5D=04-05-2021&person2=200295&items\\_per\\_page=25](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search?field-keywords=Churchill&field-keywords2=&field-keywords3=&from%5Bdate%5D=01-01-1961&to%5Bdate%5D=04-05-2021&person2=200295&items_per_page=25) accessed 06/04/2021; 'Advanced Search', [https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search?field-keywords=Churchill&field-keywords2=&field-keywords3=&from%5Bdate%5D=01-01-1961&to%5Bdate%5D=04-05-2021&person2=200296&items\\_per\\_page=25](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search?field-keywords=Churchill&field-keywords2=&field-keywords3=&from%5Bdate%5D=01-01-1961&to%5Bdate%5D=04-05-2021&person2=200296&items_per_page=25), accessed 06/04/2021.

<sup>22</sup> 'Statement on United States Defence Policy',

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-united-states-defense-policy>, accessed 06/04/2021.

<sup>23</sup> 'Remarks at a Campaign Rally for Senator Don Nickles in Norman, Oklahoma',

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-campaign-rally-for-senator-don-nickles-norman-oklahoma>, accessed 06/04/2021.

where the limits on policymakers' freedom of action were stressed.<sup>24</sup> Such an analysis brings important insight, and a similar approach more grounded in particular contexts would have given the book a more detailed sense of changes in this mythology over time. Moreover, given that the appeasers are ever present in stories told about Churchill, narratives that rehabilitate them by implication challenge the significance and necessity of Churchill's intervention, addressing the content of Finney's study would have added considerable important context.

On occasion in *The Churchill Myths*, such a structure is used to good effect. For instance, it takes Andrew Roberts' biography of Churchill as an illustration of the context of internal struggles in the 1990s Conservative Party. The authors underline how Roberts highlighted Churchill's racism not as a criticism of these attitudes, but as a critique of their inconsistency with the overly welcoming immigration policy of his 1950s premiership, a symptom of the Tory 'wetness' that was a concern of the party's right in the context of John Major's acceptance of European integration.<sup>25</sup> This is a perceptive analysis, and more frequent application would have added much to *The Churchill Myths*. This could serve as a means to ask some of the overarching questions about modern Britain, to assess whether the persistence of 1940 suggests a stagnant period, or its constant reinterpretation implies a more dynamic era. This would have also provided an opportunity to include the historiographical discussion that the book lacks, and thus put it into dialogue with this scholarship, as well as providing an opportunity to historicise these works, especially their 2000s proliferation.<sup>26</sup>

In summary then, *The Churchill Myths* provides a timely and readable intervention in contemporary debates about Churchill. In a relatively short book, the authors reveal

---

<sup>24</sup> P. Finney, *Remembering the Road to World War Two: International History, National Identity, Collective Memory* (London, 2011), pp.192-94,200-02.

<sup>25</sup> Fielding, Schwarz and Toye, *The Churchill Myths*, pp.88-89.

<sup>26</sup> M. Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Abingdon, 2004); M. Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London, 2000); L. Noakes and J. Pattinson (eds.), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London, 2013).

important historical insights, showing the adaptability of Churchill over time to suit a variety of political purposes, but also the staying power of his heroic leadership in 1940 as the defining Churchill myth. Yet that brevity also leaves the reader wanting more, with issues over competing Churchill myths and its significance for broader questions in both British history and particular contexts underexplored. Fielding, Schwarz and Toye demonstrate the variety of issues that can be viewed through the lens of Churchill's memory but leave historians with plenty of angles still to discover.

## Bibliography

### Primary Bibliography

Carter, N., 'This is the moment to learn the wartime generation's lesson', *The Times*, May 8, 2020, p.5.

Limaye, Y., 'Churchill's legacy leaves Indians questioning his hero status', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-53405121>, accessed 01/04/2021.

Walker, P., 'Boris Johnson says removing statues is to 'lie about our history'', <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jun/12/boris-johnson-says-removing-statues-is-to-lie-about-our-history-george-floyd>, accessed 30/03/2021.

'Advanced Search', [https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search?field-keywords=Churchill&field-keywords2=&field-keywords3=&from%5Bdate%5D=01-01-1961&to%5Bdate%5D=04-05-2021&person2=200295&items\\_per\\_page=25](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search?field-keywords=Churchill&field-keywords2=&field-keywords3=&from%5Bdate%5D=01-01-1961&to%5Bdate%5D=04-05-2021&person2=200295&items_per_page=25), accessed 06/04/2021.

'Advanced Search', [https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search?field-keywords=Churchill&field-keywords2=&field-keywords3=&from%5Bdate%5D=01-01-1961&to%5Bdate%5D=04-05-2021&person2=200296&items\\_per\\_page=25](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search?field-keywords=Churchill&field-keywords2=&field-keywords3=&from%5Bdate%5D=01-01-1961&to%5Bdate%5D=04-05-2021&person2=200296&items_per_page=25), accessed 06/04/2021.

'Has the town of Tonypany forgiven Winston Churchill? | ITV News', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhYQ13z4dYc>, accessed 01/04/2021.

'Remarks at a Campaign Rally for Senator Don Nickles in Norman, Oklahoma', <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-campaign-rally-for-senator-don-nickles-norman-oklahoma>, accessed 06/04/2021.

'Statement on United States Defence Policy', <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-united-states-defense-policy>, accessed 06/04/2021.

### Secondary Bibliography

Connelly, M., *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Abingdon, 2004).

Fielding, S., Schwarz, B., Toye, R., *The Churchill Myths* (Oxford, 2020).

Finney, P., *Remembering the Road to World War Two: International History, National Identity, Collective Memory* (Oxford, 2011).

Freeden, M., 'The Morphological Analysis of Ideology', in M. Freeden, L. Tower Sargent and M. Stears (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford, 2013), pp.115-137.

Noakes, L. and Pattinson, J. (eds.), *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London, 2013).

Smith, M., *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London, 2000).