



PAUL ADDISON, 1943-2020
WHAT MATTERS IS THE TRUTH*

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A fond and funny memory of Paul Addison is one which few know about. It came during a Washington symposium on '[Churchill as Peacemaker](#)', later published as an outstanding book. During a break, we walked over to the White House, which Paul wanted to see. We stood at the iron fence, gazing at the seat of power across the lawn. As we chatted, Paul remarked on how close we were to the building itself. 'The security seems pretty light', he said. 'It's not hard to visualise some stray lunatic standing here and spraying the walls with bullets'. That same afternoon, a fellow named [Francisco Duran](#) did exactly that with a semi-automatic rifle. Paul Addison heard the news white-faced. We all jibed him that microphones were planted on the fence. And now the Secret Service had arrived and was asking to interview him... Paul was not amused!

I have lost count of how often I have dined out on that one. And even more on the Addison maxim: 'I have always thought that, paradoxically, it diminishes Churchill to treat him as superhuman'. Paul was a scrupulous historian. He realised, above all, that what matters is the truth. Tell the truth about your subject, he would say. If your subject is worthy, it needs no enhancement. Primarily, his wife Rosy remembers, he aimed 'to make making history accessible, understandable and comprehensible to his fellow human beings'.

A Corpus of Excellence

We met in mid-1994, when my wife Barbara and I hosted our seventh Churchill Tour. Our second in Scotland, it was a notable adventure, taking us all the way to [Scapa Flow](#) in the Orkneys. There we saw, on full-color sonar, the shape of [HMS Royal Oak](#) on the bottom – torpedoed by *U-47* in 1939. It was an eerie image, like that of [USS Arizona](#) at Pearl Harbor. Our tour began with a vast exhibit of Churchill in political cartoons, organised for us at Edinburgh University by Paul, and David Stafford, his longtime colleague. From then on, I paid attention, and read every book of theirs I could lay my hands on.

Paul Addison wrote and edited ten Churchill works, listed at the end of this collection. His classic, still a 'standard work', was *Churchill on the Home Front* (1992). Atypically for most Churchill writers then, Paul took the approach of studying the

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domestic side of Churchill's politics. Until this book, the prevailing impression was that Churchill was bored with domestic issues. Methodically Paul showed how completely wrong that was, weighing the evidence with grace and understanding.

'High sense of the British moment'

Paul understood the statesman's greatness, warts and all. 'Which warts', [William Buckley](#) said, 'do not deface Churchill because of the nobility of his cause, and his high sense of the British moment'. Nothing will ever surpass 1940 – but Churchill accomplished much else. Paul limned the peaks, and the valleys. Churchill's faults like his virtues were on a grand scale, he would say. But there is no doubt that the latter heavily outweighed the former.

Here is an example: Churchill's youthful fling with [Eugenics](#), and the idea of sterilising the mentally incompetent. There was [quite an uproar about this](#) recently when it was 'discovered'. (Read: someone finally found it in the public records.) Churchill's Eugenics was a fling because he abandoned it quickly, along with most intelligent people. But some readers were outraged. 'I can never think good things of him again', one said. 'No truly educated intelligent person could adopt such views'. (Well... a lot of educated intelligent persons happily adopted Nazism and Bolshevism.) Dr. Addison showed us the balanced way to look at this issue. Churchill's intentions were benign, he wrote, 'but he was blundering into sensitive areas of civil liberty'. Then he drew a deeper lesson no one else had contemplated:

Yet it is rare to discover reflections of a politician on the nature of man. Churchill's belief in the innate virtue of the great majority of human beings was part and parcel of an optimism he often expressed before the First World War.

This was perceptive, broadminded and fair. And Paul also explained why Churchill was unique. Few politicians reflect on 'the nature of man'. Fewer still believe 'in the innate virtue of human beings'. Such understanding is a rare thing among writers of history.

His Work Abides

Another Addison triumph was, conversely, one of his shortest: his Churchill entry for the [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#). Writing for the *DNB* is not easy. One must be deft, economical, balanced and accurate. Paul's Churchill piece is a model of incisive wisdom. It appears in book form in the Oxford VIP series. Everyone should read it: all that matters about Winston Churchill in only 138 pages. And here is another Addison classic: *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero*. The same clear exposition, expanded to 320 pages. Many reviewers call it the best 'brief life' of Churchill ever published.

In August 2018, Paul Addison was diagnosed with lung cancer. He fought it for eighteen months. Last June, we had planned a lunch with Paul and Rosy and a mutual friend, the historian Gordon Barclay, when the [Hillsdale College Cruise](#) stopped in Edinburgh. Alas, gales in the Firth of Forth prevented our anchoring. By then Paul had told me of his situation. Around the New Year I asked his friend David Stafford for news. It was not good. On January 21st he left us.

Our grief and loss are deeply felt. Paul was a gentleman scholar: a man of strong convictions, who never let them interfere with his historical judgment. Hagiography

is fatal. Truth matters. That was his cardinal lesson. Above all, he left a corpus of excellence from which young people will always learn things worth knowing. His work abides, and as Churchill said, a man never dies as long as he is remembered. All who love history will forever remember Paul Addison.