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BOOK REVIEW

Churchill and Australia

by Graham Freudenberg

*Pan Macmillan Australia: Sydney, 2008, 613 pp., ISBN 9781405038706,
RRP \$55 (hardcover)*



This book covers the extraordinary saga of Churchill's relationship with Australia from 1907 to 1955. I have admired Churchill since boyhood, but found him portrayed here as totally focused on the security of Britain and the use of Dominions' assets to support that security, irrespective of their interests and wishes.

Churchill had a significant and often adverse influence on Australia in furthering his concepts of the Empire and Australia's proper role in it. He contributed to some of our great military disasters – Gallipoli (1915), Greece (1941), Crete (1941) and Singapore (1942). He also was responsible for some near misses – the Chanak Crisis (1922), when he wanted Dominion troops to conduct operations against the Turks; his diversion of the 7th Division to Burma against the expressed wish of the Australian Government (1942) and its return to Australia largely unprotected; and his desire to launch an offensive against Japan by a landing on the tip of Sumatra (1943).

Churchill treated Australian Prime Ministers and officials with disdain in varying degrees from 1907, even though each Australian was genuinely concerned to make every effort to help Britain, except where the interests of Australia were clearly threatened. His treatment of Australian governments included: duchessing their leaders; forcing their decisions by announcing actions before they had agreed to them; and variously ignoring, distorting and/or countermanding their express wishes. He resented Australia's direct contacts with the United States from the time of the Great White Fleet's visit in 1908 through to early 1942, when Curtin made the historic 'Australia looks to America' declaration.

He was also a source of paradoxes. While he kept Nazi Germany at bay in the early dark days of the war, Britain barely survived his energy and poor judgements.

He was concerned for some time to gain the support of the United States against Hitler. But when the United States did come into the war, he had to suffer the frustration of progressive relegation to the role of junior Allied partner as the United States deployed its massive resources in the European theatre.

He was pathetically concerned to restore British influence in Asia towards the end of the war, even though his strategic decisions dating back to the 1920s and operational decisions when the Japanese launched their invasions had proven major contributors to the allied losses in Singapore and Malaya. As Chancellor of the Exchequer (1924-1929), Churchill had challenged the very concept and the cost of the Singapore naval base, which was then a keystone of Australian defence policy. He totally misjudged the Japanese threat, although he was in good company in that the Australian government

had allowed the magnificent battle-cruiser, HMAS *Australia*, to be sunk in 1924 as part of the Washington Naval Treaty.

Churchill never visited Australia, notwithstanding that invitations were regular, travel times shrunk enormously in his lifetime, and Australian Prime Ministers and officials made the trek to Britain regularly.

In 1953, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his six-volume history, *The Second World War*. While admitting that he would write history to protect his reputation, he was careful not to embarrass or offend the United States, but showed no such sensitivity to Australian governments. He was, however, concerned not to criticize the Australian military and valued their capacities to the point of near obsession.

One of the great paradoxes, given the way that Churchill treated Australia, must surely be the creation and success after his death of The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, which has enabled over 3000 Australians from all walks of life to further their search for excellence overseas.

Freudenberg, however, believes that Churchill thought more about Australia, and about what Australia thought of him, than any world leader before or since. He concludes that Churchill did feel that Australia's interest counted in the common cause, but that Roosevelt did not.

The volume is well referenced and has some excellent photos and superb chapter notes. The notes, sources, select bibliography and index comprise 75 pages (12 per cent of the volume).

My criticisms of this volume are minor. The author states (p. 84) that Australian submarine *AE2* (scuttled 30 April 1915) came closest to fulfilling 'Churchill's grand vision of the fleet sailing in triumph to Constantinople'. In fact, other British and some French submarines conducted more successful operations in the Dardanelles before and after *AE2* was scuttled.

Churchill and Australia would support any study of Australian foreign policy and its evolving relationships with our western allies. It draws critical lessons for Australia. If Australia wishes to remain independent, it cannot simply seek to supplement the defence operations and assets of a great ally and hope that our national interests and those of our ally will continue to coincide. Indeed, Freudenberg concludes that the principal lesson is the extent to which we must rely upon ourselves. And, as Churchill demonstrated through his life – 'Never despair'.

I came to agree with the dustcover comment that this book will be hailed as an Australian masterpiece.

Ken Broadhead