

# The Tale of Two Winstons

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Winston Churchill is generally regarded as one of the most prominent figures of the twentieth century. As Prime Minister he led Britain to victory against the Nazi war machine, leading *Time* to name him 'Man of the Year' in 1940 and 'Man of the Half Century' in 1949. As recently as 2002 he was voted 'the greatest Briton' by a BBC poll. His tenacious personality has become iconic as displayed in his images with his cigar, fingers stretched in a 'V', and pugnacious face. Leading one to believe Winston Churchill was probably a man very seldom mistaken for someone else. However, at the turn of the century he was often mistaken for the best-selling American novelist by the same name. In the early 1900s the American Winston was far more famous in the United States than his British name sake. This article will examine the historical peculiarity of the two Winston Churchills, their brief correspondence, their chance meeting in Boston in 1900, and the striking similarity of their lives.

Winston S Churchill first became aware of his American name-sake in the Spring of 1899 when he began receiving letters with 'congratulations on [his] skill as a writer of fiction.' Ever hopeful, the British Churchill supposed that these letters were 'belated appreciation for the merits of *Savrola*', which was published the previous year and was his only work of fiction.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, his American counterpart was winning considerable fame as the bestselling author of *Richard Carvel* (1899) a historical romance set in Maryland during the American Revolution. Aware their names may cause confusion, the British Churchill decided to write the American Churchill a letter.<sup>2</sup> On 7 June 1899 the British Churchill sent his letter which began, 'Mr. Winston Churchill presents his compliments to Mr. Winston Churchill, and begs to draw his attention to a matter which concerns them both. ' He praised the American Churchill for his work and the sales of *Richard Carvel* but feared that because he too was an author,



their names might get confused. He continued, 'Mr. Winston Churchill will no doubt recognise from this letter-if indeed by no other means- that there is a grave danger of his works being mistaken for those of Mr. Winston Churchill.' British Churchill also noted that he would sign all of published works henceforth as 'Winston S Churchill' and not 'Winston Churchill'. Finally the British Winston concluded by saying that 'The text of this note might form a subject for future discussion if Mr. Winston Churchill agrees with Mr. Winston Churchill's proposition.'<sup>3</sup>

Delighted by the British Churchill's letter, the American Churchill replied in the same confusing, yet droll fashion, noting, 'Mr. Winston Churchill is extremely grateful to Mr Winston Churchill for bringing forward a subject which has given Mr. Winston

Meeting of the two Winston Churchills.  
*The Boston Herald, 18 December 1900*

Churchill much anxiety. Mr. Winston Churchill appreciates the courtesy of Mr. Winston Churchill in adopting the name of 'Winston Spencer Churchill'. He assured the British Churchill that had 'he possessed any other names, he certainly would have adopted one' and that their works would not conflict in any way. The American Churchill concluded his letter by noting, 'Mr. Winston Churchill will take the liberty of sending Mr. Winston Churchill copies of the two novels he has written. He has a high admiration for the works of Mr. Winston Spencer Churchill, and is looking forward with pleasure to reading *Savrola*.'<sup>4</sup>

In October 1900, Winston S Churchill won a seat in Parliament, but before he took his seat the following

Winston Churchill c1900.  
Library of Congress Washington, D.C.



Winston Churchill c1900.  
Library of Congress Washington, D.C.



February, he went on a lecture tour of America organised by Major James B Pond. Winston S Churchill arrived in New York on 8 December and went to see an old friend, W. Bourke Cockran, who introduced Churchill to several prominent Americans such as Teddy Roosevelt and William McKinley. A few days later, the British Churchill's first lecture was at New York's luxurious, Waldorf-Astoria hotel. While the duty of introducing the British Churchill was ironically turned down by the American Churchill, it was performed by another prominent American, Mark Twain.<sup>5</sup> Though Twain had previously condemned Britain saying it had 'sinned by getting into war with the Boers,'<sup>6</sup> his characteristic wit demonstrated his own unique connection with the British Churchill.<sup>7</sup> Twain even waved the banner of Anglo-American unity that Churchill, himself would later take up as Prime Minister. He began, 'For years I have been a self appointed missionary for the joining of America and the mother land in friendship and esteem. Where I have been and whenever I have stood before a gathering of Englishmen or Americans, I have urged my mission and have warmed it up with compliments to both countries.' He then moved to the subject of the Boer War, noting that Churchill could competently speak about it and repeated the notion that Britain had sinned by getting into war with South Africa but kindly added 'just as we have sinned in getting into a similar war in the Philippines.' Twain concluded his introduction with expounding the virtues of Anglo-American unity:

Mr. Churchill by his father is an Englishman, by his mother an American, no doubt a blend that makes a perfect man. England and America; we are kin. And now that we are also kin in sin, there is nothing more to be desired. The harmony is perfect-like Mr. Churchill himself, whom I now have the honor to present to you.<sup>8</sup>

From New York, Winston S Churchill went to Baltimore and then to Boston where another confusion of mail brought the two Churchills together in person. Upon arriving in Boston, Churchill was feeling ill and went to his room at the Hotel Touraine while Major Pond went to collect his mail. However, Major Pond discovered that the mail meant for the British Churchill had been forwarded to the American Churchill's house on Beacon Street. Since he could not get the letters, Pond went to the American Churchill's house and convinced him to return to the hotel room of his British counterpart. Winston S Churchill answered his door and upon seeing Major Pond with a man he did not recognise, he waited for an introduction. The three stood in silence until Major Pond, smirking, said 'Mr. Churchill. Mr. Churchill.'<sup>9</sup> Both Winstons agreed to have lunch and spent most of the afternoon together, discussing their lineage and searching for a common ancestor but to no avail.

After lunch, the two Winstons went for a stroll through Boston Common and the British Winston suggested to the American Winston that he should

go into politics. 'I mean to be Prime Minister of England: it would be a great lark if you were President of the United States at the same time.'<sup>10</sup> That evening Winston S Churchill spoke at Tremont Temple to the Anglo-American society and had a very successful lecture; according to the Boston *Herald* Churchill's lecture 'drew to Tremont Temple the largest audience ever seen within that edifice.'<sup>11</sup> Afterwards the American Winston treated the British Winston to dinner at the Somerset Club near the former's house on Beacon Street where they 'made each other complimentary speeches.'<sup>12</sup> However, the absurdity of this historical peculiarity persisted. After dinner the British Winston was given the American Winston's bill for the evening's frivolity, despite the American Winston's intention to pay. The whole affair was on the front page the next morning in the Boston *Herald* in an article called 'Namesakes Meet: Winston Churchills Fast Friends'.<sup>13</sup> The article included a sketch of the two men walking through the Boston Common.

While their light-hearted correspondence and brief meeting suggest an amusing historical coincidence, the similarity of the two Winstons went beyond their names. They shared several life experiences. When they met in Boston, both Winstons were not yet thirty years old (the American Winston was born in 1871). An orphan, the American Winston's childhood was a lonely one. Likewise, the British Winston had a lonely childhood as a result of his

distant and often emotionally remiss parents. Both Churchills went to military academies for their education: the American Winston went to The United States Naval Academy and graduated in June 1894, while the British Winston went to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst and graduated in December 1894. Both Winstons served in the military, although the British Winston saw considerably more action in field with engagements in Cuba, India, and Soudan than did his American counterpart who left the American Navy after only 3 months to become an editor for the *Army and Navy Journal*.

But the similarities of the two Winstons did not stop there. They both were amateur painters, and writers. While the American Winston was far more prominent in the field of fiction, his British counter-part wrote several accounts of his experiences in frontier wars such as *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (1898), *The River War* (1899) and *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* (1900).

The American Winston wrote historical romances, *Richard Carvel* (1899), *The Crisis* (1901) and *The Crossing* (1904) which were all best-sellers and widely read in the States at the turn of the century. The American Churchill followed his historical romances with a slew of more bestselling books, *Coniston* (1906), *Mr. Crewe's Career* (1908), *A Modern Chronicle* (1910), *The Inside of the Cup* (1913), *The Far Country* (1915), and *The Dwelling-Place of Light* (1917), which saw him exchange genres from romantic fiction to socially conscientious realism.<sup>14</sup> During the same time the British Winston focused his writing on his father's biography, released in 1906. However, even his writing grew to be more popular than the American Churchill's after the First World War when the British Winston released his history of the war in a six volume book entitled *World Crisis* (1922-29). A feat he would repeat after the Second World War in another six volume set entitled *The Second World War* (1948-53) which won the British Churchill the Noble Prize for literature in 1953.

An additional striking similarity of the two Winstons was that they displayed such a deep concern for public matters that it resulted in both of them entering politics. The British Winston was a Member of Parliament, held several different offices in government, and was eventually Prime Minister. The American Winston was far less successful in this area. He was only involved in the state politics of New Hampshire, elected as representative

for Cornish, New Hampshire in the state congress in 1902. Interestingly, historian Robert Pipel, implied in his *Churchill in America* (1976), that it was the British Churchill's urging of the American Churchill to get into politics that served as the catalyst for the American's political designs.<sup>15</sup> However, in all probability it was Teddy Roosevelt who inspired the American Winston to get involved in politics. His political speeches and correspondence with Teddy Roosevelt lend credence to this notion.<sup>16</sup> However, after his failed gubernatorial bid for New Hampshire in 1912 as a Progressive, the American Winston swore off elected politics, but continued to write.

Even as late as 1906 the idea that the British Winston would be Prime Minister and the American Winston would be president had not left the public imagination. After both their political careers were underway, the *New York Times* wrote on 9 August 1906 that it invited their readers' attention to possibility that one day they might see 'this spectacle-President of the United States, Winston Churchill; Prime Minister of Great Britain Winston Churchill.'<sup>17</sup> It was also reported in the *Sketch* in London a day prior that 'Two of the men most conspicuous in the foreground of public life at the present moment are the Winston Churchills. Our has set the empire ringing with his speech on the Transvaal Constitution. America's is the cynosure of 80,000,000 pairs of eyes in the States on two counts.'<sup>18</sup>

As the British Winston entered his office as Minister of Munitions in 1917, the American Winston abandoned writing and went into seclusion. As the career of Winston S Churchill continued to rise, (and then fall in the thirties) his American counterpart remained silent and out of the public eye. However, in 1941 as the Second World War was raging, after the British Winston had become Prime Minister, the American Winston released his final book, *The Uncharted Way* (1941), a treatise on the philosophy of Christianity. It did not receive the acclaim of his earlier books and he retreated back into silence this time for good: in 1947 after the British Churchill's defeat in the 1945 election, the American Churchill passed away. The *New York Times* lamented his passing stating that 'When he died Wednesday, his once great public had forgotten him.' The British Winston was to become Prime Minister once more in 1951 and remain in the public's imagination as one of the liberators of Europe during the Second World War, and was so popular in the

United States, he was awarded with an honorary citizenship in 1963 by an Act of Congress. Today, on both sides of the Atlantic, most people are aware of only one historical figure by the name of Winston Churchill, though, as the *New York Times* wryly noted in its obituary for the forgotten American, 'in 1900, even after the British Churchill had been taken prisoner by the Boers and dramatically escaped, there was no question in this country as to which Churchill was *the* Winston Churchill.'<sup>19</sup>

## References

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