

## REVIEWS

**Richard Freeman, ‘Unsinkable’: Churchill and the First World War. Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2013. Index. 271 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7524-9889-8. Hardback. Price £18.99.**

For all the books on this politician and especially Martin Gilbert’s multi-volume study, it might be thought that there would be no need for any more. Nevertheless from my own studies I have found that there is, as even with all the detail of Gilbert’s work, there are aspects of his professional life as First Lord of the Admiralty that are entirely missing. So, in struggling to understand precisely *why* Churchill had such strong opinions on naval gunnery and after many months of my pouring over day-to-day records of the run-up to the 1915 Gallipoli landings, I learned of Richard Freeman’s newly-published book.

The author having adopted a style almost of a thriller, on casual skimming it reads well. It was for this reason, and also its title that I thought was very apt, that I picked it up. The elements that I had glanced at in a well-known bookshop showed some of Churchill’s well-known character defects and so, in spite of the blurb on the dust jacket, I thought that this might be a serious character study.

This is, essentially, two books in one. As already mentioned, the author has dealt with *some* of his negative traits and while spending time on these, they only form a small element of the total. This is unfortunate, as if these had been built upon, with detailed analysis of the original records as shown in the ‘Works Consulted’ (along with other pertinent documents), a deeper understanding of Churchill’s wartime performance might have resulted. However, the bulk of this is an unreserved defence of Churchill in complete contradiction and so, I have come to the conclusion that this is targeted to Churchill devotees, albeit those that acknowledge that he was not absolutely perfect.

Before getting into the substance, it should be pointed out that it is peppered with minor factual mistakes. All too often warship types are incorrect, as are officers’ ranks etc., etc. Of course, these may well have arisen in the production process, but all are easily checkable and so, there is no justification, they should have been corrected at the proof-reading stage. There are also four traits that are *far* more worrying. The first is the author’s basic lack of knowledge on naval and military matters. For instance, there is his treatment of the first seaborne combats that arose out of the German *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* (lately Hamburg-Amerika’s *Königin Louise*) attempting to mine the Thames in early August 1914. In reality, the minelayer’s sinking was merely a skirmish that occurred by accident, rather than by design, but

was described by Richard Freeman as a seemingly 'brilliant feat'. Incidentally, *Amphion's* subsequent loss can be attributed to poor decisions taken by the British commander.

The author has repeatedly sought to make his personal opinions fact. For example, Commodore Second Class Roger Keyes (that was not then either a Commander, or Captain) is said to have been 'one of the boldest and finest naval commanders of the twentieth century'. Admittedly Keyes has been let off lightly by historians. Even so, not all have taken such a charitable line. For instance in his published memoirs, Vice-Admiral Kenneth Dewar slated Keyes both for poor staff work during the Dardanelles debacle and also his wholesale blaming of others for his own shortcomings.

Through selective selection of events and records the author has claimed a coherence in Churchill's behaviour that more detailed studies just do not show. This can be clearly seen in the competing 'plans' for naval-only, or combined amphibious operations along the Belgian coast, on the north-western coast of Germany, or in the Baltic. Unable to make any sense out of the many documents on these plans, personally I have come to the conclusion that Churchill wished to do everything, everywhere, all the time and sought to attain all this personally, by manipulating everyone that he came into contact with.

Lastly, the author has made assertions absolving Churchill from *all* responsibility in matters of great importance. Perhaps the most serious relates to events in early January 1915 that ultimately resulted in the ill-fated Dardanelles-Gallipoli campaign. One does not have to be an advocate of Graham Clews' recent rather extreme book, *Churchill's Dilemma* that is equally adamant that Churchill was responsible for initiating these disastrous events, to know that Churchill was indeed the prime instigator. Proposed Anglo-Greek operations in autumn 1914 that Churchill was heavily involved in are not even mentioned in Richard Freeman's account. Instead, Lord Kitchener was named as the guilty party as of January 1915 and subsequently, with the author maintaining it was merely a 'mythology' that it was Churchill. Apart from anything else, the author cites the main series of naval telegrams for this theatre in his sources and this alone weakens his argument. If these telegrams are read conscientiously, not only do they show Churchill acting essentially as commander-in-chief from early January onwards, he kept the Naval War Staff firmly out of the decision-making process and in effect was his own staff. And, so, having portrayed Churchill as the victim of 'mythology' and worse, Churchill carried on struggling. I do agree with Richard Freeman that this politician was indeed 'unsinkable', but from a completely different understanding and opinion.

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