Award Ceremony Speech

Presentation Speech by S. Siwertz, Member of the **Swedish Academy**

Very seldom have great statesmen and warriors also been great writers. One thinks of Julius Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, and even Napoleon, whose letters to Josephine during the first Italian campaign certainly have passion and splendour. But the man who can most readily be compared with Sir Winston Churchill is Disraeli, who also was a versatile author. It can be said of Disraeli as Churchill says of Rosebery, that «he flourished in an age of great men and small events». He was never subjected to any really dreadful ordeals. His writing was partly a political springboard, partly an emotional safety valve. Through a series of romantic and self-revealing novels, at times rather difficult to read, he avenged himself for the humiliation and setbacks that he, the Jewish stranger in an England ruled by aristocrats, suffered despite his fantastic career. He was not a great writer but a great actor, who played his leading part dazzlingly. He could very well repeat Augustus' words of farewell: «Applaud, my friends, the comedy is over!»

Churchill's John Bull profile stands out effectively against the elder statesman's chalk-white, exotic mask with the black lock of hair on the forehead. The conservative Disraeli revered the English way of life and tradition which Churchill, radical in many respects, has in his blood, including steadfastness in the midst of the storm and the resolute impetus which marks both word and deed. He wears no mask, shows no sign of cleavage, has no complex, enigmatic nature. The analytical *morbidezza*, without which the modern generation finds it hard to imagine an author, is foreign to him. He is a man for whom reality's block has not fallen apart. There, simply, lies the world with its roads and goals under the sun, the stars, and the banners. His prose is just as conscious of the goal and the glory as a runner in the stadium. His every word is half a deed. He is heart and soul a late Victorian who has been buffeted by the gale, or rather one who chose of his own accord to breast the storm.

Churchill's political and literary achievements are of such magnitude that one is tempted to resort to portray him as a Caesar who also has the gift of Cicero's pen. Never before has one of history's leading figures been so close to us by virtue of such an outstanding combination. In his great work about his ancestor, Marlborough, Churchill writes, «Words are easy and many, while great deeds are difficult and rare.» Yes, but great, living, and persuasive words are also difficult and rare. And Churchill has shown that they too can take on the character of great deeds.

It is the exciting and colourful side of Churchill's writing which perhaps first strikes the reader. Besides much else, *My Early Life* (1930) is also one of the world's most entertaining adventure stories. Even a very youthful mind can follow with the keenest pleasure the hero's spirited start in life as a problem child in school, as a polo-playing lieutenant in the cavalry (he was considered too dense for the infantry), and as a war correspondent in Cuba, in the Indian border districts, in the Sudan, and in South Africa during the Boer War. Rapid movement, undaunted judgments, and a lively perception distinguish him even here. As a word-painter the young Churchill has not only verve but visual acuteness. Later he took up painting as a hobby, and in *Thoughts and Adventures* (1932) discourses charmingly on the joy it has given him. He loves brilliant colours and feels sorry for the poor brown ones. Nevertheless, Churchill paints better with words. His battle scenes have a matchless colouring. Danger is man's oldest mistress and in the heat of action the young officer was fired to an almost visionary clear-sightedness. On a visit to Omdurman many years ago I discovered how the final struggle in

the crushing of the Mahdi's rebellion, as it is depicted in *The River War* (1899), was branded on my memory. I could see in front of me the dervish hordes brandishing their spears and guns, the ochre-yellow sand ramparts shot to pieces, the Anglo-Egyptian troops' methodical advance, and the cavalry charge which nearly cost Churchill his life.

Even old battles which must be dug out of dusty archives are described by Churchill with awesome clarity. Trevelyan masterfully depicts Marlborough's campaigns, but in illusory power it is doubtful that Churchill's historic battle scenes can be surpassed. Take, for instance, the Battle of Blenheim. One follows in fascination the moves of the bloody chess game, one sees the cannon balls plough their furrows through the compact squares, one is carried away by the thundering charge and fierce hand-to-hand fighting of the cavalry; and after putting the book down one can waken in the night in a cold sweat, imagining he is right in the front rank of English redcoats who, without wavering, stand among the piles of dead and wounded loading their rifles and firing their flashing salvoes.

But Churchill became far more than a soldier and a delineator of war. Even in the strict but brilliant school of the parliamentary gamble for power he was, perhaps from the outset, something of a problem child. The young Hotspur learned, however, to bridle his impetuosity, and he quickly developed into an eminent political orator with the same gift of repartee as Lloyd George. His sallies, often severe, excluded neither warmth nor chivalry. In his alternation between Toryism and radicalism, he followed in the footsteps of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill. He has also portrayed the latter's short, uneasy, tragically interrupted political and personal life in a work which has an undisputed place of honour in England's profuse biographical literature.

Even the First World War, despite all setbacks, meant a vast expansion for Churchill as both politician and writer. In his historical works the personal and the factual elements have been intimately blended. He knows what he is talking about. In gauging the dynamics of events, his profound experience is unmistakable. He is the man who has himself been through the fire, taken risks, and withstood extreme pressure. This gives his words a vibrating power. Occasionally, perhaps, the personal side gets the upper hand. Balfour called *The World Crisis* (1923-29) «Winston's brilliant autobiography, disguised as world history.» With all due respect to archives and documents, there is something special about history written by a man who has himself helped to make it.

In his great book on the Duke of Marlborough (1933-38), whose life's work is so similar to Churchill's own, he makes an intrepid attack on his ancestor's detractors. I do not know what professional historians say of his polemic against Macaulay, but these diatribes against the great general's persistent haters and revilers are certainly diverting and temperamental.

The Marlborough book is not only a series of vivid battle scenes and a skillful defence of the statesman and warrior. It is also a penetrating study of an enigmatic and unique personality; it shows that Churchill, in addition to all else, is capable of real character-drawing. He returns again and again to the confusing mixture in Marlborough of methodical niggardliness and dazzling virtuosity: «His private fortune was amassed», he says, «upon the same principles as marked the staff-work of his campaigns, and was a part of the same design. It was only in love or on the battlefield that he took all risks. In these supreme exaltations he was swept from his system and rule of living, and blazed resplendent with the heroic virtues. In his marriage and in his victories the worldly prudence, the calculation, the reinsurance, which regulated his ordinary life and sustained his strategy, fell from him like a too heavily embroidered cloak, and the genius within sprang forth in sure and triumphant command.» In his military enthusiasm Churchill forgets for a moment that Marlborough's famous and dearly loved Sarah was by no means one to let herself be ordered about. But it is a wonderful passage.

Churchill regretted that he had never been able to study at Oxford. He had to devote his leisure hours to educating himself. But there are certainly no educational gaps noticeable in his mature prose. Take, for example, Gr*eat Contemporaries* (1937), one of his most charming books. He is said to have moulded his style on Gibbon, Burke, and Macaulay, but here he is supremely himself What a deft touch and at the same time what a fund of human knowledge, generosity, and gay malice are in this portrait gallery!

Churchill's reaction to **Bernard Shaw** is very amusing, a piquant meeting between two of England's greatest literary personalities. Churchill cannot resist poking fun at Shaw's blithely irresponsible talk and flippancy, which contrasted with the latter's fundamental gravity. Half amused, half appalled, he winces at the way in which the incorrigibly clowning genius was forever tripping himself up and turning somersaults between the most extreme antitheses. It is the contrast between the writer, who must at all costs create surprises, and the statesman, whose task it is to meet and master them.

It is not easy to sum up briefly the greatness of Churchill's style. He says of his old friend, the Liberal statesman, John Morley, «Though in conversation he paraded and manœuvred nimbly and elegantly around his own convictions, offering his salutations and the gay compliments of old-time war to the other side, [he] always returned to his fortified camp to sleep.» As a stylist Churchill himself, despite his mettlesome chivalry, is not prone to such amiable arabesques. He does not beat about the bush, but is a man of plain speaking. His fervour is realistic, his striking - power is tempered only by broad-mindedness and humour. He knows that a good story tells itself. He scorns unnecessary frills and his metaphors are rare but expressive.

Behind Churchill the writer is Churchill the orator - hence the resilience and pungency of his phrases. We often characterize ourselves unconsciously through the praise we give others. Churchill, for instance, says of another of his friends, Lord Birkenhead, «As he warmed to his subject, there grew that glow of conviction and appeal, instinctive and priceless, which constitutes true eloquence.» The words might with greater justification have been said of Churchill himself.

The famous desert warrior, Lawrence of Arabia, the author of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, is another who has both made and written history. Of him Churchill says, «Just as an aeroplane only flies by its speed and pressure against the air, so he flew best and easiest in the hurricane.» It is again striking how Churchill here too speaks of the same genius that carried his own words through the storm of events.

Churchill's mature oratory is swift, unerring in its aim, and moving in its grandeur. There is the power which forges the links of history. Napoleon's proclamations were often effective in their lapidary style. But Churchill's eloquence in the fateful hours of freedom and human dignity was heart-stirring in quite another way. With his great speeches he has, perhaps, himself erected his most enduring monument.

Lady Churchill - The Swedish Academy expresses its joy at your presence and asks you to convey to Sir Winston a greeting of deep respect. A literary prize is intended to cast lustre over the author, but here it is the author who gives lustre to the prize. I ask you now to accept, on behalf of your husband, the 1953 Nobel Prize in Literature from the hands of His Majesty the King.

From ***Nobel Lectures***, *Literature 1901-1967*, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969

Recommended: