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'Playing Fair': Winston Churchill's Relationship with *The Telegraph*

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Various source media, *The Telegraph* Historical Archive 1855-2000



An Inauspicious Beginning

Winston Churchill's relationship with *The Telegraph* began after he was stationed in Imperial India in 1896. Looking for an adventure and a way to build his name, Churchill lobbied to join a campaign on the Northwest Frontier. But before Churchill wrote for *The Telegraph* or went to India, he already had journalism on his mind. His interest in writing might be traced to his father, Lord Randolph Churchill. As well as being a politician, Lord Randolph was a journalist-cum-travel writer. He was highly paid (two thousand guineas for twenty letters) for his letters in *The Daily Graphic* which recounted his trip to South Africa.¹ Like his son, Lord Randolph was no stranger to controversy. He openly complained about the catering on his ship; he made outlandish remarks about women having descended from apes; and he even urged 'British occupation of Portuguese territory in Mozambique'.² Though this was seen as controversial, if not embarrassing, back in London, the power of journalism was not lost on young Winston.

He developed his writing very early on. In 1895, just before his twenty-first birthday, Churchill left to visit the United States for the first time. While there, he was entertained by journalism. Although he confessed to his brother that American journalism was 'vulgarity divested of truth', he was quick to add that 'vulgarity was a sign of strength'.³ From the US, Churchill went to Cuba to observe the Cuban War of Independence and was commissioned by *The Daily Graphic* to report on

what he had seen. Though he faced enemy fire for the first time in his life, he managed to write five dispatches before he left Cuba.

By the time Churchill volunteered to go on a mission to the Malakand valley in the Swat region of what is now Pakistan, he had a fascination with journalism and experience of writing in the heat of battle. He had planned to write about the Malakand campaign before he left, but when he reached the front he was delighted to learn that his mother, Lady Randolph (Jennie) Churchill, had 'persuaded the influential *Daily Telegraph* to publish his letters from the war'.⁴

However, Churchill's early relationship with *The Telegraph* was not a happy one. On advice from Lord Minto, Lady Randolph agreed that Winston would publish the letters anonymously as 'a Young Officer'.⁵ This prompted Lady Randolph to accept the terms offered by the Managing Director of *The Daily Telegraph*, which included a stipend of £5 an article. This was disheartening for Churchill, who had originally asked for £10 an article, and he was adamant that his own name should appear in the by-lines. Voicing his disappointment, he told his mother that he had 'written them with the design, a design which took form as the correspondence advanced, of bringing my personality before the electorate'. He doubly rebuked her by concluding with the quote from Dr Samuel Johnson: 'Nobody but a blockhead ever wrote except for money'.⁶

¹ Richard Toye, *Churchill's Empire: The World that Made Him and the World He Made* (London, 2011), p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (London, 1991), p. 57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵ He told Lady Randolph that Winston publishing under his own name would be 'very unusual and might get you into trouble'. Lady Randolph to Winston Churchill 7 Oct, 1897; Churchill Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, CHAR 1/8/111-112.

⁶ Winston Churchill to Lady Churchill, 5 September, 1897; CHAR 28/23/52.

Despite proclaiming that *The Daily Telegraph* was 'mean' and complaining about the editing, Churchill wrote 15 dispatches for the paper while he was attached to the Malakand campaign.⁷ These dispatches were widely acclaimed and earned Churchill a solid reputation in London. They also formed the basis of his first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War* (1898).

An Upturn in Fortunes: Forming Lasting Friendships

Once money started coming in from his book, Churchill was once again very happy to have been affiliated with *The Daily Telegraph*. He proudly wrote to his grandmother, the Duchess of Marlborough, that he was 'paid...£100 for his frontier letters'.⁸ *The Telegraph* also praised Churchill's book in its review. It made clear that the earlier articles published 'during the recent frontier war in India' had been written by 'Lt Winston Spencer Churchill, the son of the late Lord Randolph Churchill'.⁹ The newspaper also distinguished itself by pointing out the importance of Churchill's final chapter, 'The Riddle of the Frontier', in which Churchill evaluates Britain's 'Forward Policy' in India. This at times critical commentary did not sit well with military officers like H.H. Kitchener, who thought Churchill was just trying to make a name for himself and was little more than a 'medal hunter'.¹⁰ Despite disapproval in some circles, *The Daily Telegraph* continued reviewing Churchill's early books and admiring his mastery of 'a most fascinating style'.¹¹ Remarkably, *The Daily Telegraph* even positively reviewed his only novel, *Savrola* (1899),

believing its 'abundant cleverness is manifest throughout, and gives promise of admirable work to come when this talented soldier author returns from his campaigns'.¹²

These reviews helped to cement Churchill's lasting relationship with *The Telegraph*. It was bolstered by Churchill's personal relationship with Lord William Camrose, the proprietor of *The Daily Telegraph*. Lord Camrose, like many of his contemporaries, was apprehensive of Churchill. The latter had developed a bad reputation in the wake of the failed military campaign at the Dardanelles and Gallipoli. However, once Churchill had fallen from power after David Lloyd George's coalition government lost the General Election of 1922, Churchill was without an office. He had become estranged from the Liberal Party, while the Conservatives were still very suspicious of him. He had defected from them to the Liberals in 1904, literally standing up in the House of Commons and crossing the floor to sit on the Liberal benches.¹³ Churchill was looking for a way back into politics when Lord Camrose offered him a speaking event at Aldwych Publicity Club in May 1923. This provided Churchill with a political platform and helped to re-launch his career, and he never forgot this act of kindness. He wrote to Lord Camrose after the Second World War, 'My Dear Bill, who has never wavered nor varied in your fruitful friendship during all those long and baffling and finally tumultuous years when you took the Chair for me at that luncheon'.¹⁴

⁷ Winston Churchill to Lady Churchill, 5 Jan, 1898; CHAR 28/24/2-10.

⁸ Gilbert, *Churchill*, p. 86.

⁹ Review of *The Malakand Field Force*, 14 March 1898, *The Daily Telegraph*.

¹⁰ Roy Jenkins, *Churchill* (London, 2001), p. 35.

¹¹ Review of *River War*, 8 Nov, 1899, *The Daily Telegraph*.

¹² Review of *Savrola*, 16 February, 1900, *The Daily Telegraph*.

¹³ Gilbert, *Churchill*, p. 167.

¹⁴ Lord Hartwell, *Lord Camrose: Giant of Fleet Street* (London, 1992), p.131.

This ensured a firm friendship between the two for years. Churchill and his friend F.E. Smith invited Lord Camrose to join the 'Other Club', a dining society which they founded in 1911, while they often played bridge together. This helped to maintain both Churchill's relationship with *The Telegraph* and Lord Camrose. Though Churchill wrote for several broadsheets, *The Daily Mail* and *The Evening Standard* among them, he always kept an eye on *The Daily Telegraph*. In February 1930 a change in the newspaper's print style and layout prompted disquiet among certain quarters of the British public. But Churchill was not one of them. He wrote to the editor to say that 'in its new form *The Daily Telegraph* is a most convenient paper to handle and I hope it may long continue to flourish in its faithful support of the Conservative cause'.¹⁵

Further Contributions: Foreign Policy and the US

During the 1930s, Churchill's journalistic relationship with *The Daily Telegraph* came into its own, with Lord Camrose helping urge Churchill to contribute to the paper.¹⁶ He wrote a series of articles entitled 'American Impressions', which recounted his experiences and attitudes towards the United States. This was followed by a series based on his five-volume history of the First World War, *The World Crisis* (1923–1931), which included a separate collection of articles on the naval aspects of the war.¹⁷ These articles were published as the often overlooked series, 'U-boat War'.¹⁸ But the most historically significant contribution to *The Daily*

Telegraph came in 1938, when Churchill began writing articles on British foreign policy and international affairs, illuminating Europe's slow descent into war.

These articles began when Churchill wrote to Lord Camrose in April 1938 to inquire if *The Telegraph* would be interested in publishing his articles on foreign policy. Although Churchill had been writing for *The Evening Standard*, his candid opposition to the Chamberlain Government and the policy of appeasement had caused the paper to terminate his contract. Churchill told Lord Camrose that *The Evening Standard* wished to rebuke him (Churchill) because his views were 'not in accordance with the policy of the paper'.¹⁹ Camrose, as equally opposed to the appeasement policy despite being personally close with Chamberlain, welcomed the opportunity.²⁰ However, Camrose could not make a long-term commitment on politically-based articles owing to the dynamic nature of politics. He replied to Churchill that he was happy to take on the articles on a fortnightly basis but that 'a definite agreement for any lengthy period ... might be a serious variance'.²¹ However, they would work on a rolling six-month basis.

Churchill set to work at once. Emery Reeves, who acted as Churchill's agent, was fearful of *The Telegraph* taking on Churchill because it had such a wide readership in Europe, but Churchill remained firm,

¹⁵ 'The New Size Daily Telegraph', 18 February 1930, *The Daily Telegraph*.

¹⁶ Churchill and Lord Camrose regularly saw one another during this period. For instance see the various dinner party invitations at CHAR 1/232/80 and CHAR 1/244/44.

¹⁷ The drafts in the Churchill Archives are CHAR 8/592 and 593.

¹⁸ The first of these articles was published on 16 November, 1931. The remaining articles in the series were published every two days after this, up until 30 November.

¹⁹ Winston Churchill to Lord Camrose, 4 April, 1938; CHAR 8/601/1–2.

²⁰ Gilbert, *Churchill*, p. 588. See also David Slough, *No More Champagne* (New York, 2015), p. 267.

²¹ Lord Camrose to Churchill, 6 April, 1938; CHAR 8/601/3–6.

telling his old editor, Reginald Thompson, that '*The Daily Telegraph* is a much more powerful and suitable platform for me'.²² Indeed it was; readership increased in Europe and Churchill had a magnificent time writing the articles. On 7 January, 1939, after a full day of talks with French leaders, he dictated his articles over an opulent dinner with champagne.²³ These articles later went on to form the backbone of Churchill's book *Step by Step* (1939). By then *The Daily Telegraph* had lost faith in the Chamberlain Government and clearly supported Churchill, Anthony Eden and other opponents of appeasement in the hope that they might form a government.

The Second World War

Though Churchill could no longer write for *The Daily Telegraph* during the Second World War, his relationship with the paper continued. He intervened a number of times on behalf of the paper. In 1942, Churchill wrote a letter to Harry Hopkins, President Roosevelt's major-domo, in which he described Lord Camrose as 'a great personal friend of mine and also a most powerful and steady supporter of the Government'.²⁴ He urged Hopkins to find time for Lord Camrose to meet President Roosevelt, which would further empower *The Daily Telegraph*. In 1943, during the severe days of censorship, Churchill even personally saved the paper from persecution. In May that year, it published news of three RAF pilots who escaped from Germany, violating the 'D' notice

forbidding publication of potentially sensitive material. The Army and Air Council wrote to Brendan Bracken, the Minister of Information, demanding that charges be brought against the paper. The Ministry of Information took a hard line, but Churchill wrote to them to explain that *The Daily Telegraph* was a 'friendly paper' and that Lord Camrose was 'a patriotic man'; Churchill continued, 'Would it not be well to see him first and explain that we have no choice unless he can give absolute assurance for the future?'²⁵

This clearly left a strong legacy. Brendan Bracken wrote to Churchill in June to remind him to congratulate Lord Camrose on his 50 years in journalism.²⁶ Churchill did just that, celebrating the latter's 'jubilee as a journalist'. Churchill concluded by saying, 'No man has honoured his profession more than you in your half-century association with the Press. Long may you continue to lend grace to Fleet Street!'.²⁷ However, they did not always get along. In 1944 Churchill visited the recently liberated Italy and he fired a shot on Nazi positions. *The Telegraph* reported that it was 'a ranging shot and fell short'.²⁸ Churchill wrote to Lord Camrose personally and explained 'It is well known that the man who pulls the lanyard which I did has [less] to do with aiming the gun than the Archbishop of Canterbury'.²⁹

²² Churchill to Revees, 8 April, 1938; CHAR 8/607/29-30.

²³ David Slough, *No More Champagne* (New York, 2015), p. 273.

²⁴ Churchill to Harry Hopkins, 27 Oct, 1942; CHAR 20/81/114.

²⁵ Lord Hartwell, *Lord Camrose: Giant of Fleet Street* (London, 1992), p. 290.

²⁶ Brendan Bracken (Ministry of Information) to Churchill 21 June 1943; CHAR 20/95B/189.

²⁷ Churchill to Lord Camrose, June 1943; CHAR 20/95B/192.

²⁸ 'Premier Fires Shell at Nazi guns in Italy', 22 August, 1944, *The Daily Telegraph*.

²⁹ Churchill to Lord Camrose, 24 August 1944; CHAR 20/180/70.

Financial Saviour and Later Relations

Such was the strength of their bond that, shortly after the war, Lord Camrose came to Churchill's aid when he ran into financial difficulty. Churchill had been in serious debt prior to the war, and planned to put his beloved country home, Chartwell, up for sale. This was before he had published his Second World War memoirs, leaving him with little income at the time. In August 1945, Lord Camrose asked if Churchill would sell the house privately to friends who would then let him live out the rest of his days there. Churchill agreed; by 1946 Lord Camrose was able to raise the funds among a small group of friends, saving Chartwell from the market with the agreement that after Churchill's death, Chartwell would go to the National Trust and open to the public.

In the meantime, Churchill continued to write for *The Daily Telegraph*. His memoirs were serialised and reviewed every year in which a new volume came out. In 1948, Harold Nicholson reviewed the first volume *The Gathering Storm*, saying it was beyond a mere autobiography; rather 'it was a work of literature'.³⁰ Churchill published articles on the notion of a United Europe, as well as commenting on the post-war balance of power in a four-article series which acted as a postscript to his war memoirs in 1958.³¹ He also continued to write in to the editors to make corrections, as he had with Lord Camrose. In November 1950, Churchill wrote to the editor to correct the horse racing column, 'From the Course', which had printed that

³⁰ Harold Nicholson, 'Mr Churchill's History of the Second World War', 4 October, 1948, *The Daily Telegraph*.

³¹ Churchill 'One way to stop a new war' 30 December 1946 and 'The Grand Design of a United Europe' 31 December 1946, *The Daily Telegraph*; and Churchill, 'Soviet Shadow Over Europe' 21 April 1958, 'Design for the

Churchill's favourite horse, Colonist II, was a gelding, when it was in fact a colt.³²

Though Churchill left public life after the close of his premiership in 1955, the public were still very interested in him. Several articles were written about him during the twilight of his life, from his frequent painting trips to the welfare of his pets.

As Churchill left public life, he looked back on his career, not only as a politician but also as a journalist. Thus in 1955, when *The Daily Telegraph* celebrated its 100th anniversary, Churchill wrote to congratulate the paper. His words reveal how he viewed his longstanding relationship with *The Daily Telegraph*:

'As the oldest living member of *The Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post* staff I am glad to send my warmest greetings and congratulations to the paper on reaching its century. It is 58 years since I was a *Daily Telegraph* correspondent in the days of the first Lord Burnham during the Malakand Campaign. In those enlightened times a combination of military and journalistic functions were possible. Over 55 years ago, through my friendship with Oliver Borthwick, I became a *Morning Post* correspondent in South Africa; and only recently my old and revered friend, the late Lord Camrose serialised for six years in the paper my memoirs of the Second World War.

'I therefore take an almost filial interest in the fortune of what is by any standards a great national newspaper; which plays for its side and plays fair. It is now venerable in years but young in method and spirit. Experience and enterprise are the combination capable of ensuring the continued advance which it is my heartfelt wish it may be destined to enjoy'.³³

Defence of Freedom' 22 April 1958, 'The H bomb and our Future' 23 April 1958 and 'We Have Not Tried in Vain', 24 April 1958 *The Daily Telegraph*.

³² *The Daily Telegraph*, 1950.

³³ Dockter, *Winston Churchill at the Telegraph*, pp. 9–10 and 'The Daily Telegraph Centenary', 29 June 1955, *The Daily Telegraph*.

And so it was a fitting send off for a relationship which had proved fruitful for both parties, marking a lasting legacy that will doubtless continue to be remembered for many years to come.

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