

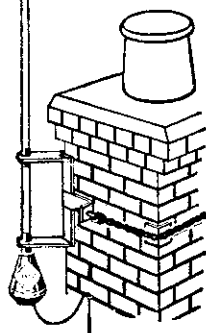
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The Greatest Englishman

IT is still a feat of endurance to live 80 years in this world, and people who succeed in it are congratulated warmly by their friends. Next week, when Sir Winston Churchill reaches his 80th birthday, the occasion will be noticed and celebrated very widely. The greatest living Englishman is spoken of in many countries as the most eminent public figure of the 20th Century; and to be so acclaimed, in these turbulent times, is to be assured of a noble place in history.

Sir Winston is old, but he is still Prime Minister of Britain; and although he may not now be the man he used to be, the familiar accents can be heard when he feels again the challenge of large events. His critics say that his political career should have ended with the war; they are also saying (and some of his friends are in agreement) that he is too reluctant to make way for younger men. He is not the first and will not be the last statesman to hold on to power. It is a characteristic of age to cling to what has been gained; and Sir Winston Churchill, a man in whom all attributes are on the grand scale, could not step down willingly. If he decides to retire at 80, it will be because he feels without the strength to continue: the decision will be his, and he will need no prompting.

Next week, however, British people will be thinking more of the past than of the future. They will remember the man who, at an age when most are glad to think of retirement, became Prime Minister in times of the gravest difficulty and danger. Few other statesmen have been so completely the embodiment of a nation's will. Churchill is not a representative Englishman (which may help to explain why he has never been really successful in

peacetime politics), but at his zenith he seemed to express with remarkable fullness that side of the English character which is formidable in war. His tenacity, his refusal to accept the logic of hopeless situations, his energy and vision, and above all, his sense of history—and through it his grasp of strategic realities—were drawn from the deepest sources of national life.

The English are phlegmatic, but they have an instinct for the word and the deed, a little larger than life, which belong to a crisis; and when Churchill spoke to them, in the greatest of all broadcasts, they knew what he meant, and knew the words he used—knew them from the Bible and Shakespeare, and the common speech that runs through English literature. People who listened in every part of the Commonwealth will remember how in those broadcasts the confused situations were made plain, and the darkest outlook bearable. Without Churchill, perhaps, there would have been another; but it is hard to imagine who else could have had the perfect combination of wisdom, strength and eloquence which was needed to sustain British peoples in 1940 and beyond. *The Times* described him recently as the man who saved Western civilisation, and the exaggeration rests upon a truth. He led England when only the British peoples were opposing Hitler's march: if a lesser man had been in his place the margin between defeat and survival might have been too narrow. The world spins on, and political movements run their course; but Churchill, even in old age, and near the end of his career in Parliament, towers still above all his countrymen. On his 80th birthday they will salute him again, affectionately and with profound admiration, remembering only his greatness.

N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 26, 1954.