



Winston and Clementine CHURCHILL "Intimate Conversations (1908 - 1964)"

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

As the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings has just been celebrated, these "intimate conversations" between Winston Churchill and his wife take on a particular acuity. Mrs Françoise Thibaut, well known to our readers, gives us an analysis of them which, according to the standards of the Cahiers, should have appeared in the section "On a aimé...". The finesse, richness and details of this analysis and its topicality are such that it finally has its rightful place in the "General Interest Articles" section. Others will follow it in future issues.

Finally translated into French, the letters that Winston and Clementine Churchill exchanged between 1908 and 1964 are published by Éditions Taillandier under the title "...Intimate Conversations».

Prefaced by François Kersaudy and admirably commented on by Lady Mary Soames-Churchill (their youngest daughter), who continuously situates these texts, which are often quite complex, in the context of the history of the world. The texts are beautiful, bear witness to a great complicity, shared tenderness, lively and sometimes very funny, and the whole benefits from an impeccable translation.

It is not the totality (about 2,000 letters), but only those (about 700) that are of historical interest or allow us to better understand the personalities. They can be cross-referenced with Winston's "official memoirs". They reveal the joys and sorrows of two strong characters, their private and public worries. Above all, they allow us to travel back in time to an era that has disappeared forever.

The personalities

Winston Churchill is described as a "war-loving civilian" because of his roles in both World Wars (especially WW2). Today's youth often have only the image of an old man with a cigar, stuffed into a Royal Navy condom. That's a bit short. It's forgetting that Winston Spencer-Churchill was a cavalry officer in the 4th ^{Queen's} Own Hussars, (after twice trying to get into Sandhurst): he took a very active part in the imperial operations in India, Egypt and especially in South Africa where his exploits (taken prisoner by the Boers, he escaped and walked alone more than 400 kilometers to reach Durban) were paid for by the British. He was already a prolific writer and published them to earn a living. He was authorized by Chamberlain at the War Office to be a war correspondent for the Morning Post, on condition that he did not reveal any strategic information . .

The famous "No sports" attributed to him is also somewhat misleading: excellent horseman, intrepid polo player, honourable golfer, tireless hunter, airplane pilot in the 1910s, outdoor enthusiast, environmentalist before the time. He enthusiastically devoted himself to gardening and breeding, even becoming a mason or sewer worker to better equip his Chartwell property.

Wherever he was in the world, his letters usually begin with the climate, the weather, the rains or the clouds; he described nature, the trees, raving about the smallest flower, the vegetable patch, the corn fields or the meadows. Certainly, this mental support for nature - which he began to paint from 1917 onwards - enabled him to escape from the problems he had to deal with. This distancing from the immediate, which protects his lucid equilibrium where others would lose their footing.

At the age of 30 (in 1904) he left the army to enter politics: elected to the House of Commons with the support of Douglas Haig and Balfour in the modest constituency of Oldham, he thus began 50 eventful parliamentary years, interspersed with 15 electoral campaigns and eight different ministerial posts. Winston met Clémentine Hozier in the spring of 1908; love at first sight was immediate and shared; she was pretty, wooed, elegant without being vain, tall for her time, from a very honourable but broke family. It doesn't matter (Winston with a great name is himself rather "tight" on the financial side). After a brief engagement, they were married on September 12, 1908 in St Margaret's of Westminster and were almost immediately separated, as Winston was once again on the campaign trail.

Private and public landmarks

The 56 years of correspondence reveal above all a fabulous love story. Clem adores his Pug and is ecstatic about his talents, but she is also a good listener: To protect herself from the Churchillian whirlwind, she soon gets into the habit of escaping on the pretext of cures, tennis tournaments, skiing, children's holidays... The Kat is then flooded with fiery missives, alternating political statements, international visions, work in the house, children's flu, parliamentary or literary exploits. She responds with spirit, gives advice, slows down enthusiasm or anger, comments on speeches, chats, worries about their families, friends, the... For ease will come only very late, not thanks to politics, but thanks to the literary talents of the divine husband.

In May 1909, Winston (newly married, Clem is expecting his first child), who is in Prussia, invited with the Prime Minister by Kaiser Wilhelm to contemplate military manoeuvres, writes: "I would very much like to have some practice in the handling of great forces. I have a great deal of self-confidence ... in tactical combinations" (letter of 30 May). Amazing anticipation!

In February 1916, while in the trenches with the 6th Battalion of ^{the Royal} Scots Fusiliers, having chosen to rejoin the army (following his resignation after the droughts), he had to leave the army in order to return to his home country. Winston begins his letters with "My dearest one", a letterhead that he will never abandon again, almost always ending with "Your devoted husband who loves you forever". Clementine is more reserved, but playful, teasing, often worried, but she covers him with kisses until 1964, overwhelming him with nicknames and "Mon tendre amour". During his months in the trenches, she punctually sends him cigars, cognac, champagne, roasts, cheese, sleeping bag, woollen jerseys, waterproof boots, a typewriter, a periscope that he still uses at the time of WW2. They discuss at length the possible return to politics from September 1916. Later, she complains about his long absences and "vagrancy". He describes Ypres massacred, the "useless killings", and is outraged at this; Clementine writes (24 March 1916): "War is a terrible revelation of moral strength."

As early as 1936, Winston, from Chartwell, writes to Clem (on a cruise): "No doubt that the Germans are already substantially superior in arms and aviation... We are slipping irretrievably towards confrontation". The Kat replied: "Germany is now the largest armed power in Europe... English political life is depressing". Many political exchanges follow, mixed with the number of eggs laid by the swans, the children's success at school, painting projects, cleaning the swimming pool. We are also immersed in the painful affair of the abdication of Edward VIII - which affects Winston a lot - but although annually invited to Balmoral, kings and queens remain quite distant from current affairs. As Prime Minister, he travelled in person to greet Elizabeth, the new Queen, at the airport; her coronation in March 1953 disrupted their personal plans.

Clementine was his principal advisor and first reader, assisting him during the harrowing election campaigns and sometimes replacing him. Wife of a minister or of the P.M., very much in demand, she copes, even when exhausted or pregnant: at the beginning of WW2, she creates the canteens of the armament workers; when Winston takes on the heavy responsibility of the war of resistance in 1940, she sends him an admirable but measured letter (27 June 1940), in which she enjoins him to. She acknowledges his anguish and the heaviness of his task, but "you are not as nice as you used to be," and reminds him of her favourite principle: "Souls can only be reigned over in peace"; she concludes, "I love you very much".

During WW2, Winston travels a lot, mostly in military aircraft, unpressurized, very uncomfortable. They communicate by coded messages, often quite comical. She's worried about his health because he's over 65. After the serious pneumonia that has nailed him to Morocco, she demands that a doctor accompany him at all times: it will be Lord Moran, an intrepid and faithful friend, who administers a daily "Moran" to him, which allows Winston to hold out.

President of the British Red Cross, at the end of the conflict she goes to Moscow, meets Stalin (who receives her very well) to help the Russian orphans. It was she who, in 1953, was to collect her Nobel Prize for Literature from the hands of the King of Sweden and deliver the speech of thanks, because Winston was held up by the Bermuda conference, which had been urgently planned for a long time with the Americans.

All these letters reflect a complicity, a common reflection on countless private and public concerns, and this will last until the final election campaign (which she disapproves of): they are respectively 84 and 74 years old. In fact, Winston's mental approach is quite simple: he wants to "serve", to be useful to his beloved country and, early on, when he entered politics, he sincerely believes that without him Britain will not get by. In all the

ministerial posts he held, he was a relentless reformer, often against the advice and disapproval of his colleagues: these private letters show the "other side of the coin", the deep thinking, the hesitations, the moral crises... because Winston is a "positive depressive" who cures himself by going to the countryside and painting. He often isolates himself, stays at the bottom of his bed, retreats into historical writing at the rate of 15.000 words daily, dictates, writes, counts the eggs of the hens, trims his hedges, hunts the boar... In 1926, Chancellor of the Exchequer, overwhelmed by budget preparations, the Irish crisis, unemployment, he takes a whole day to take his children to London Zoo, and writes to Clem (on a trip): "I think I had the most fun."

Political practice

Courteous, affable, cheerful lives, the Churchill are received everywhere, traveling extensively for the good of the Crown or world peace. They often mix private and public travel; the letters show all the ramifications of relationships, relatives; in fact, a whole world and a way of life gone forever and which will no longer exist.

From the age of 15 and until his death in 1965, Winston Churchill met Everyone^[2]. Through his relatives and family alliances, he is close to all European "power" families. Nobody impresses him, but he knows how to be humble and discreet when it is appropriate. Although he often "thunders" (as Clem or his collaborators sometimes reproach him), he also knows how to keep quiet, stew in his corner and "be nice", as his wife says.

Until the 1920s, we mainly meet the old staff of the British Empire: Balfour, whom the Kat calls (letter of February. 1916) of "old grey tomcat", Curzon, Asquith, Peel: Great Britain is entangled in the Irish question, that of the coalmines (Winston invents their first social welfare system in 1911 and recounts his Homeric vote), the suffragettes (the Kat, much more liberal than the Pug, is in favour: they bicker a bit about it), a heavy budget deficit. Then Lloyd George appears, whom Clem calls a "pathetic little boor" (she will never appreciate him), who will become a friend and a strong support, the North American staff, Botha, the first governor of the South Africa, Hailé Sélassié, Antony Eden who is a relative since he married a niece, and whose fragile health will be a source of permanent concern. And so many others...

Then Churchill's great confidence and admiration for Roosevelt is shown.^[3] They are both writing from the bottom of their beds of sick old men what will become the Atlantic pact (on which we are still sitting).

Both Clementine and Winston have the naivety of honest and well-educated people in an environment that has always been favourable to them: at first, Clem is dazzled by Benito Mussolini (later she will change her opinion); Winston is fascinated by Stalin whom he believes to be sincere; even innocence at first towards Broz-Tito and Makarios. In 1943 in Cairo, the meeting with the very smiling Madame Tchang Kai Chek deserves a detour (letter of November 26, 1943). In 1944, Winston is very affected by the deliberate massacre of the Warsaw resistance fighters; Stalin, in Clem's letters, becomes "the ogre". In a very long missive written in Malta on the H.M.S. Orion on February 1, 1945^(the war is not over), Pug sketches the entire future of India, the catastrophic but inevitable partition, the disasters caused by Gandhi, Nehru (and their cliques).

Generally speaking, the WW2 seen from the inside under Churchill's pen is exciting.

France and the French

France is constantly present in the life of the Churchill family: holidays, cures, shopping... (Clementine's mother ended her life in Dieppe (rue des Fontaines). Then, they love the South of France: Cannes, Agay, Golfe Juan, Monaco (where the casino is a magnet), most often in friendly properties that they sometimes occupy for long weeks. There is also the Basque Coast, the cures of the Kat in the water cities, Paris where the very comfortable embassy of Great Britain is always welcoming.

But there is a very curious paradox: if France, its sky, its climate, its countryside, its luxury products and its governesses are highly appreciated, the Churchill have practically no contact with the French. They remain "among chic Anglo-Saxons", a few North Americans or, at best, with a cosmopolitan elite. For Winston, the Côte d'Azur has all the qualities of enchantment, especially in January-February, when he often stays for three weeks. Until he discovers Morocco, Marrakech and the Mammounia, which surpasses in comfort all French hotels (letter of January 8, 1936).

As for the French political staff, they regularly had to go through the mill: the Churchill couple's words were hardly ever heard, whatever the period.

In March 1918, Winston, just demobilised, was in Paris with a British delegation (letter of 31 March): he met Clemenceau, Pétain, Foch and Weygand: "...We dined with Pétain on his sumptuous train... Clemenceau spoke to me in complete confidence... He amused me, he's an extraordinary character...". Later, he visited the battlefield near Amiens, praised the efficiency of the Anglo-American troops, and collaborated with Louis Loucheur, French Minister of Armament until 1930. In 1924, he met Herriot who was ill, Gaston Doumergue. Only Poincaré resists criticism. In 1927, still with Loucheur, he had lunch with Aristide Briand, Vincent Auriol and 15 deputies from different parties: the Pug found all this rather sterile, and remarked that "the French love to sink into their crisis". Then, Chautemps, Daladier, Reynaud ("who is recovering from his financial triumphs"; it is January 1939) are rather brocaded. Léon Blum and Paul Reynaud "are very worried, but without any efficiency; the French are soft". Little comes out of all these long meetings of 1938-1939. Later, at the beginning of WW2, Churchill repeatedly remarked on the "French nonchalance" towards the Axis forces.

Churchill-de Gaulle

The relationship between Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle was marked by ambiguity and a certain mistrust. Certainly, even though Winston helped General de Gaulle in London a great deal by discreetly providing him with some money in hand - so as not to upset Roosevelt, who did not want to hear from the General that he had been killed - he did not want to be told that he had been killed. Roosevelt, who did not want to hear about the General, whom he considered to be a dangerous freelance gunman - some premises, a little money and equipment, their "human" relations were always rather execrable, marked on both sides by a certain contempt.

Until his coup d'éclat in June 1940, Charles de Gaulle was part of the anonymous officers' cohort who only accompanied the stars. The first "real" meeting took place in Cairo in August 1942, where Winston also received the Russians. De Gaulle is only "quoted", without any comment (long letter dated 9 August 1942). Then we are in Tobruk,

Stalingrad, El Alamein (in November): victory is looming in the distance, we must get organized. The Americans are in North Africa. Then comes what Winston calls "a comic interlude": the Giraud-de Gaulle meeting. Le Pug comments: "He thinks he's Clemenceau" (Casablanca, May 1943). Shortly afterwards, Churchill waits for de Gaulle in Algiers, accompanied by General Georges; the comment is without appeal: "Everyone here expects him to do everything possible to create discord and to put forward his personal ambitions" (letter of May 29, 1943). France would be neither at the "Quadrant" meeting in Quebec City, nor in Teheran, still less in Yalta, totally absent from the decisions concerning Greece, Yugoslavia, Iran. The Big Three share the world without even its opinion. In August 1944, Winston, finally rather reassured by the famous "Free France", invited de Gaulle to lunch; de Gaulle refused. Winston was furious: one does not refuse an invitation from Churchill! Clémentine commented: "General de Gaulle has abused your courtesy... and behaved with the calculated impoliteness of which he is accustomed" (letter of 16 August 1944). A few days later, Winston is in Naples (liberated) and speaks again of the Gallic "insolence": "No doubt that the France of the Gaullists will be a France more hostile than ever to England since Fachoda" (August 17, 1944). However, in January-February 1945, when victory was near, Winston and Clementine were alarmed at the appalling living conditions of the French: Churchill made the US president "bend" and especially General Marshall, who unblocked trains of coal and food. The laborious negotiations for the liberation of Paris by the 2nd AD are well known. Churchill did not raise an eyelash. And the French state only reappears internationally in Potsdam.

The post-war period was hard on everyone, both privately and publicly: the Churchill children divorced, the only son Randolph, the only son of the Churchill family, and the only son of the Churchill family, the only son of the Churchill family. has political and emotional outbursts that embarrass Winston. It's true that it's really not easy to find one's place with such a monumental father and such a difficult name to bear. As soon as peace is made, Winston is ousted from power; he will never get over it. His health is declining, as is Clementine's, exhausted by all these years of worry and tension.

A sort of very Gallic "revenge-tribute" took place on November 6, 1958. It was one of the last official releases of Winston. In Paris, Charles de Gaulle is in power. He solemnly presented Winston Churchill with the Liberation Cross, the highest distinction awarded to those who had served the Free French Forces and the Resistance. Only two Britons received this distinction: King George VI and Churchill. Clementine is here. Then they both flew off to the South.

One may not appreciate this paving stone (830 pages), this sentimental-elitist unpacking that constitutes these "theories of the peace". Intimate Conversations of the couple Clementine and Winston Churchill. However, it sheds intense and subtle, often unexpected light on important aspects of our recent history. Churchill, in his long, full life, lived it all: the good and the bad, the glorious and the pitiful, the infamous and the pleasing, the popular and the elitist, the quiet and the dangerous... and above all the unshakeable love of Clementine "without whom", he wrote again in 1963, "he would be nothing".

^[1] «My early years» published only in 1930, largely taken from the chronicles of the time, bear witness to these adventures. There are two main collections of the Churchill Archives: that of the Chartwell Foundation and that of the University of Cambridge, (main references of the book) as well as the diplomatic collection of the Foreign Office.

^[2] With the exception of Adolf Hitler. And even the famous Coco Chanel (letter of January 28, 1927) at the home of his friend the Duke of

Westminster. He finds her fascinating, "extremely capable and pleasant"; Clem is more reserved. And also the Onassis, in the spring of 1956, whose luxurious yacht he regularly squatted on from that date.

^[3] Numerous letters from July 1938 onwards: on July 8, Winston writes "the President is completely behind us", this mixed with the mischief of a cat that frightens Chartwell's doves; in December 1941, from the White House, he reiterates his confidence and admiration: He is pleased that "the Americans have finally entered the war completely".

^[4] Winston and Clementine's only son, Randolph (they had four daughters, one of whom died in infancy) married for the first time in October 1939 a beautiful woman, Pamela, daughter of Lord Digby. Winston liked her very much, found her very intelligent. She gave him a grandson named Winston, born in 1940. The marriage was dissolved in 1945. Then Pamela married Averell Harriman, a billionaire, diplomat, US ambassador to Moscow from 1943 to 1946, one of the builders of the liberation of Europe, then governor of New York, who died in 1986. His widow, Pamela Harriman, supported Bill Clinton's presidential candidacy, and the latter made her his ambassador in Paris, where she died suddenly in 1996.

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