

Ian Mitchell's STATUS-related
BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

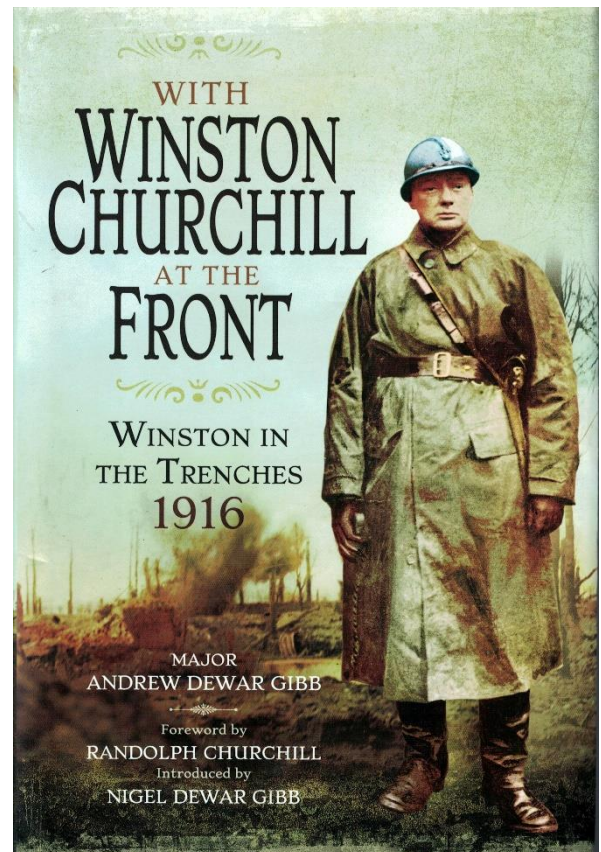
53 – *With Winston Churchill at the Front*
(15 April 2020)

WITH WINSTON CHURCHILL AT THE FRONT: Winston in the Trenches in 1916

Author: Andrew Dewar Gibb, with Nigel Dewar Gibb.
Foreword by Randolph Churchill

Publisher: [Frontline Books](#), 2016
(available on Amazon, click on cover image for link)

Descriptor: Story of Winston Churchill's six months in the trenches in 1916 by his adjutant, with additional material by his grandson to put it in context.



RusRoL relevance: *One stunningly concise description of STATUS and its concomitant, “krysha” (protection)*

“Gentlemen, I am now your Commanding Officer. Those who support me I will look after. Those who are against me I will break. Good afternoon gentlemen.” (p.60)

Reason to read: A vivid account of a small incident in the Great War, namely the six months Winston Churchill spent in the trenches as the Commanding Officer of the 6th battalion the Royal Scots Fusiliers, part of the 9th Scottish Division. It had been raised in Ayr in 1914 and bloodied at Loos in 1915. It was recuperating in a quiet sector of the line in Belgium in early 1916. Churchill had resigned from the government after the Dardanelles disaster, been appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. He felt this a useless post, and so volunteered for active service, at the age of 41, though he continued to “sit” as MP for Dundee.

In 1924, Major Andrew (later Sir Andrew) Dewar Gibb, published a short memoir of the time he served with Churchill, latterly as his adjutant. He records the change from weary scepticism on the part of the battalion when he arrived to one of almost unqualified admiration by the time he left. He thought of Churchill even then as a great man. This memoir is reproduced unchanged, and to it has been added, by his grandson, Nigel, a great deal of informative material giving the context of Churchill's service there, and a lot of further detail which aggregates to an interesting description of life in the trenches.

This book is not *Goodbye to All That* by any means, but it does succeed in its own terms by showing just how it was that Churchill managed to win the confidence and affection of his men. The result was a happy and efficient battalion, in contrast to its rather demoralised state when he took over.

Main talking points:

1. Churchill's speech to his officers after the lunch they had when he arrived to take over command. This is reproduced in the quote at the top. He had not met his subordinates before, and at their first lunch in the mess, he said nothing to any of them. He went round the table with his eyes only, staring each one out of countenance. At the end of the meal, he got up to make a speech. In only 22 words the future winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature expressed the reality of STATUS in terms which few forgot. It could almost stand as a definition of the concept. This is *all* he said: "Gentlemen, I am now your Commanding Officer. Those who support me I will look after. Those who are against me I will break. Good afternoon gentlemen." (p.60)
2. Churchill's apparent absence of physical fear, on the basis that "what's for you won't go by you", and *vice versa* in his case. He had a trench lamp wrecked by a flying piece of shell splinter while holding in his hand. Had it been two inches closer he would have lost his hand. But this did not worry him. He wasn't foolhardy, and took all sensible precautions to be safe. Beyond that he simply let life take its course without worrying.

Incidental interest: "However, the 'fearsome' new commander was turning out to be a far more considerate of his men than had been at first anticipated. It was found that if a man put in front of Winston for some misdemeanour, he would ask them if they had fought at Loos. If the answer was in the affirmative the Colonel would dismiss the charge." (p. 71)

"After a very brief period [Winston] accelerated the morale of the officers and men to an unbelievable degree. It was sheer personality. We laughed at lots of things he did, but there were other things we did not laugh at for we knew they were sound. He had a unique approach which did wonders for us. He let everyone under his command see that he was responsible, from the very moment he arrived, that they understood not only *what* they were supposed to do but *why* they had to do it." (pp. 123-3)

"There was absolutely no reticence about Churchill during ordinary social intercourse with his officers in the Mess. If he were asked a question about even the most delicate-seeming subjects he gave always a frank and honest reply." (p. 154)

"Like every other Mess in France we had a gramophone and we had a great many records good and bad. I thought the Colonel's taste in music a trifle robust, but he was probably quite right. What was needed in France was an exhalation of the Hippodrome rather than of the Aeolian Hall." (p. 158)

"My plans were appreciated and the Colonel, in one of those amusingly naïf confessions of his, said when an altogether unexpected bottle of whisky was produced, 'Whatever else they may say of me, my dear X, at least nobody can say that I have failed to display a meet and proper appreciation of the virtues of alcohol.'" (p. 175)

Thought(s) provoked: I wonder if Hitler ever read the original of this book?

Style: The *Andrew Dewar Gibb* sections are written in a slightly stilted style that was, presumably, thought amusing and dégage in the 1920s. (The Nigel Dewar Gibb parts are fine.) For example, a medical officer who had been transferred away was missed, in part because of “his earnest and loving participation in the rites of Bacchus whensoever these were celebrated...” (p. 65)

Or: “To see Winston giving a dissertation on the laying of sandbags, with practical illustrations, was to come inevitably to the conclusion that his life-study had been purely of poliorketiks [*sic*] and the corresponding counter-measures.” (p. 101)

He has the curious habit of spelling batman “bâtman”. (e.g. p. 99) I had not seen that before.

Curiously, his books about law—mostly published a fair time after this—were written in crisp and conventional English. I have already covered: [Judicial Corruption in the United Kingdom](#).

Publishing quality: Good – excellent plate section, one part in black and white, the other in colour.

Smile(s): Many: see above. Plus the fact that Churchill used to wear a blue French infantry helmet (see cover picture). He thought he looked stupid in a Glengarry (see right: Churchill (note the cigar) with Gibb).

Author: Andrew Dewar Gibb was an advocate in Scotland and a barrister in England, and later a law lecturer in both jurisdictions. He rose to become Regius Professor of Law in the University of Glasgow (1934-58). He was one of the founders of the Scottish National Party, and was its leader from 1936-40. But he left in disgust at their desire to appease Hitler, even after the War had started. He was not so stunted a personality himself, as this book shows. But he was no George Orwell either; he seems to have taken what might be called the “Duke of Windsor position” on the Nazis.

Nonetheless, Martin Gilbert quotes Churchill as writing to Clementine at the period about the officers in the battalion. They were “all middle-class Scotsmen – very brave & willing & intelligent.” (*Churchill: a Life* (1992), p. 342)



Link(s): Best I can find is this short clip of Randolph Churchill – Sir Winston’s great-grandson, who wrote the Foreword – with Nigel Dewar Gibbs at the [farm in Ploegsteert, Belgium](#), where the action in this book takes place (and which Churchill painted, as shown in two of the plates).

Overall recommendation level: UPPER MODERATE

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [Isles of the West](#) and [The Justice Factory](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called

Russia and the Rule of Law—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk.

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