



Denis Fitzgerald asserts the teacher’s role in modelling their methodology...

It has become commonplace to observe that the nature of truth is now a contestable proposition and that young people exist in a mire of misinformation and manipulation.

This is especially worrying for secular educators as we are in the truth and rationality business working to impart and imbue the quest for knowledge and reason for those in our care.

This has become especially pointed due to the shenanigans of the current resident of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Yet, the issue is much deeper than this transient political reality. Academic truth, science and fact were possibly more readily verifiable when the storage of knowledge was largely committed to static and largely immutable forms. That time has passed. It will not return. The transmission of knowledge, opinion, feeling and sentiment seems destined to remain part of the virtual, ephemeral world – online, in clouds, in whimsical posts, in occasional anonymity – wherein the power to confect in oral, visual and printed forms seems boundless.

This is a particular challenge for teachers as we are now uniquely placed to guide our students to a discriminating understanding of the new and sometimes perilous ways in which ideas, assertions, “facts” and opinions might be assessed.

If not us, then who?

The mists in time

It is instructive as a starting point, and one we might share with our students, to note that falsification and forgery have existed across human history and across all disciplines. It is certainly no modern invention.

The sciences, for example, have been subject to hoaxes and frauds for centuries. In 1813 a Perpetual Motion Machine was a temporary wonder before being exposed. A century later the Piltdown Man was “discovered” only to be exposed some time later as a carefully constructed fraud. In 1971, the “primitive” Tasaday Tribe was uncovered in the Philippines only to be later revealed as yet another artfully constructed work of deceit. Indeed, scientific fraud, forgeries and hoaxes have abounded across recorded time like alchemy itself.

Literary hoaxes have existed for centuries, almost as long as has movable type. Far too numerous to record. In the social sciences, some longstanding myths still linger. Christopher Columbus’s 1492



journey westward to the Indies was not accompanied by fears that he would fall off a flat earth. That ignorance had been widely dismissed by the late fifteenth century.ⁱ While William Caxton wrote in 1480 that a person could amble all around the earth, “lyke as a flye goth round aboute a round apple” some still believe in the twenty-first century that fears were held for Columbus’s vessel falling off the edge of the earth.

Other ancient myths and inaccuracies abound. The US Congress voted for independence on July 2, 1776 not July 4. The ensuing Constitution was not based on democratic principles but rather a guarded and patriarchal limited franchise supported by the latterly much lauded Alexander Hamilton. Only a series of Amendments to the Constitution in subsequent centuries edged the USA towards democratic principles and even now only about a half of the eligible voting population believes that it is worthwhile casting a vote in Presidential elections. Even fewer vote in Congressional elections.

The raising of the flag to mark European settlement in Australia did not take place on January 26. And only in recent times have we shed the historic falsification of *terra nullius* in this country.

The invention of tradition

Some decades ago, Eric Hobsbawm edited a major work, *The Invention of Tradition*ⁱⁱ, that chronicled the centuries-long process of manufactured heritage, “which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”

Within that work, Hugh Trevor-Roper reveals the artificial construction of Scottish mythology surrounding clans, bagpipes and kilts. Trevor-Roper shows that the imposition of an invented Highland tradition in Scotland was a construction of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The kilt, for example, was largely unknown at the start of the eighteenth century and even then was associated with barbarians.

By the middle of that century, “the kilt, as we know it, was a recent English invention and clan tartans did not exist”. Indeed the kilt was invented by an English Quaker industrialistⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps one of the greatest works of fiction that has entered popular imagination is reverence for the British monarchy and the associated pomp and circumstance that they have latterly sought to deploy in their modern day marketing. We are conditioned these days to gawp at the royals, wonder at their ancient ceremonies, appreciate their rightfulness to be hereditary rulers, delight in their centuries-old pageantry, and generally see them as timeless figures, representing order and continuity and sacred spectacle. Each royal birth, wedding, malady and death is now presented as a classic tale of our betters; their place and pelf being the natural order of things.

It wasn’t always so.



David Cannadine, formerly a Fellow of Christ’s College and academic at the University of Cambridge uncovers this as one of the great deceptions of modern times. Indeed, it was not until the late nineteenth and twentieth century that the monarchy began to take its modern artifice in ceremonial form. For much of history, the royal family was largely irrelevant to the great bulk of the population or despised or both.^{iv}

Their formal occasions were accompanied by contempt for the lower orders and a contempt for civilised behaviour, oscillating between “farce and fiasco” as Cannadine describes it.

At the funeral of Princess Charlotte in 1817 the undertakers were drunk. When the Duke of York was buried ten years later at Windsor the chapel there was so damp most of the mourners became ill. At George IV’s coronation, “grandeur merged into farce. It was necessary to employ prize fighters to keep the peace between the distinguished but belligerent guests”. When this George eventually died, his successor talked throughout the funeral, got bored, and walked out early. As *The Times* reported on the funeral the assembled aristocrats were motley, rude and ill-managed.

By the time Victoria was crowned things had not improved. There was no rehearsal; the clergy lost their place in the order of service; the choir was poor; the Archbishop of Canterbury put the royal ring on a finger too bulbous for it to fit whilst the trainbearers chattered throughout the proceedings.

Unsurprisingly, the image of the royal family continued to be poor. As Gladstone described it, “The queen is invisible and the Prince of Wales is not respected”.

Thus the Court discovered that it would have to re-invent monarchy’s outward form in order to survive. Along came the show business elements that we now associate with this current crop of royals. And as with many performers on the make they found the need to change their stage name. So, rather than descending from English time immemorial the current ruling family changed their name, by Royal Proclamation, 101 years ago, from the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha to the more acceptable invention of “Windsor”. At the same moment they considered it timely to abandon all of the titles they had held under the German Crown.

The twentieth century saw this marketing campaign notable for its use of lavish public funding of their jollifications and ceremonies and relentless use of modern media – radio, newspapers and magazines. Most of all however was the use of television where confected ritual was turned into ersatz grandeur with an accompanying pretence of ancient symbolism that were in fact, “essays in television ritual” as Cannadine describes them. In this sense they were, and are, fakes.

The great lie

Yet this deceit is not the harmless frivolity contemporary apologists for autocracy and monarchy would have us believe.



In the same year that George V was declaiming that his name was not in fact George Saxe-Coburg and Gotha millions of British soldiers were continuing to endure The Great War, a theatre of death, misery and destruction unparalleled in human history. And on all sides of this pointless slaughter were the calls to arms for God, King and Country. And spurring the nations on, again on all sides, was the fake news of propaganda, seasoned with nationalism and glorified monarchies atop each of the major belligerent countries.

An injured British soldier called this out at the time.

From his hospital bed, Wilfred Owen, penned his poem, *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, that ends with the lines describing what he called The Great Lie:

*Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori*

*(It is sweet and fitting
To die for one's country)*

In the following year, 1918, Wilfred Owen died from his wounds. He was twenty five.

The words, *Dulce et decorum est/pro patria mori*, are still inscribed at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. It is inscribed also at the US Military Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. Without irony or remorse.

Millions of lives perhaps have been lost in pursuit of the sentiment within those seven Latin words. In a 1915 school essay, Bertolt Brecht (who was to become a truly great German writer) referred to the phrase as *zweckpropaganda* – cheap propaganda for a particular cause.

It is a timely reminder to modern day educators to note that the words originally come from the Roman poet, Horace, who penned these words in pre-Christian times.

Fake news, propaganda and mass deceit are not recent developments.

What did you do in the knowledge wars?

So while we can mourn and deplore these remorseless tales of dissimulation across most areas of human inquiry, as teachers we have more active and deeper roles to play.

In each of our fields we carry a responsibility to prepare our students to acquire an intellectual resilience and nous to fathom the waters that modern times provide.



However, this remedial work by teachers ought not restrict itself to a focus on social and online media. A corrective focus there will merely limit what our true role as educators ought to be.

And in simple terms, the approach we might most usefully employ is to perpetually and overtly cloak ourselves in the academic method of our respective discipline. If we successfully inculcate that among our students they will be protected from the falsifications that they will certainly encounter online and elsewhere.

This approach suggests not treating social and online media as separate phenomena that we teach about in discrete and unique form. Rather, the times require us to deploy scepticism and academic method across all aspects of our teaching. This necessarily includes the full range of our teaching and the use of all of our sources of knowledge and enquiry.

Even in the most conventional realms of our subject matter and in domains that we might regard as settled matters.

A case study: Winston Churchill

There is perhaps no more conventional figure than Sir Winston Churchill in regards to reputation and received wisdom. He exists within a number of our syllabus areas, explicitly and implicitly, and he exists as a figure in film, television, theatre, radio and across popular culture.

The reality of his public life seems to be a suitable case for sceptical, scholarly treatment.

There are thousands of sites in Britain honouring him as well as statues of him across Australia. His bust adorns the White House, and his birthplace, Blenheim Palace, exists as a shrine to him. London has many Churchill sites headed perhaps by what are now called the Churchill War Rooms with an attached, glorifying, historically unbalanced Churchill Museum. A tour of these locations gives the sense of Churchill almost single-handedly winning World War II.

In 2002, a poll in the UK declared him to be the greatest Briton of all time. Performers such as The Kinks, Elvis Costello, Supertramp and Iron Maiden have referenced him. Theatre and television have perpetually treated elements of his life and works. He was even awarded a Nobel Prize for Literature.

In popular culture the cult seems to be ever growing.

The Book Depository lists 3458 books currently in print relating to Churchill and it is difficult to locate many works critical of him within. Meanwhile, cinema and television fascination with the figure of Churchill still abounds. He figures as a sanctified figure in movies, spoken of in hushed and reverential films such as *Dunkirk* or subject to moments of pure invention as in *The Darkest Hour*.



He has approached almost unquestionable heights of fame and glorification. The tone that now surrounds him is one of hagiography.

He is therefore a worthy case study in which we should apply appropriate scrutiny and the methodology of historical analysis.

Churchill: An Overview

Australians with an interest in history are probably familiar with the disdainful treatment Churchill showed towards our country. His disastrous Dardanelles strategy in World War One that led to the Gallipoli campaign caused thousands of pointless deaths while his attempt to prevent the return of Australian troops needed to defend the Australian mainland in World War II are commonly known.

It was Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty who considered it astute to attack the “soft underbelly” of the continent through the narrows of the Dardanelles. Militarily it was a debacle from the outset. Ill considered. Poorly implemented. Insufficiently supported. Reckless with human loss. Notwithstanding, in 1943, as Prime Minister, Churchill was again advocating the assault on that same “soft underbelly, stridently opposed as he was to the American plan to launch the offensive from the west with the landings in Normandy. The D-day strategy was of course successful despite Mr Churchill.

Early Years

Churchill was of course born of privilege descending from the Marlboroughs and being accustomed to that detached aristocratic world with all that it entailed. His love of war was kindled early. He had a collection of 1500 toy soldiers as a child and he played with them constantly even into his later years. He was educated at Harrow and then Sandhurst (where he would have daily inhaled the *dulce et decorum est* of Horace).

In this education, according to *The Independent*, “He was told a simple story: the superior white man was conquering the primitive, dark skinned natives, and bringing them the benefits of civilisation. As soon as he could, Churchill charged off to take his part in battles, ‘a lot of jolly little wars against barbarous peoples’ ... He gladly took part in raids that laid waste to whole valleys, destroying houses and burning crops. He then went off to reconquer the Sudan, where he bragged that he personally shot at least three ‘savages’ ... The young Churchill charged through imperial atrocities, defending each in turn. When concentration camps were built in South Africa, for white Boers, he said they produced, ‘the minimum of suffering’. The death toll was almost 28,000, and when at least 115,000 black Africans were likewise swept into British camps, where 14,000 died, he wrote only of his, “irritation that Kaffirs should be allowed to fire on white men... Later, he boasted that ‘it was great fun galloping about’”.



One might explain away some of these sentiments as being the expression of a callow young man born into other times. We will see later if two world wars and post-colonial realities tempered his sentiments.

Unsurprisingly, Churchill was a political reactionary in his early years. As a young politician he was happy to send in troops against impoverished, striking workers beginning with his handling of the Tonypandy riots in south Wales in 1910. These strikers clashed with police so Churchill's solution was to send in the military to crush the protesting workers.

A few years later, Churchill again called in soldiers to put down strike-related disturbances in Liverpool. Two strikers were killed by the military. In 1919, Churchill, as Secretary of State for Air and War sent in tanks and 10,000 troops to suppress strikes and civil unrest in Glasgow.

Military solutions were to be a motif in Churchill's career. Indeed, Margaret Thatcher claimed Churchill to be an inspiration for her in her use of arms to quash strikers in the 1980's.

During the Great War, as it was known, he was given his first opportunity to actually lead grander military force. He took seven weeks to persuade his Cabinet and the military of the wisdom behind his Dardanelles brainwave. It was an attempt to take the Ottoman Empire out of the war by charging through the narrow sea passage that was the Dardanelles. Three naval attempts were made to secure a bridgehead in the area and move on Istanbul and the Black Sea. They all failed. The Turks were well prepared, were ready, and had been afforded every tactical advantage by the Churchill strategy.

When the naval offensive failed, the troops of the empire were sent in (mainly Australian and New Zealand) landing on April 25, 1915. The first land attack was halted. The Turks held the superior ground. They knew their positions. The deaths suffered by the ANZACs were massive. Churchill pushed on regardless. His response to this clear military defeat and carnage was to call for more troops to be sent. He asked for a further 95,000 for what we would now call a “surge”. He was granted an additional 25,000.

Throughout the slaughter Churchill was obdurate. A rising death toll did not deter him. The extra soldiery did not improve the military situation. He was sacked from the War Cabinet. Churchill was replaced first by General Hamilton and then General Monro who was distressed by the wholesale and pointless carnage and ordered an immediate withdrawal that was eventually completed by January 1916. Churchill remarked of Monro's decision: “He came, he saw, he capitulated”.

One war ends, more wars commence

Immediately after the armistice Churchill found new use for Australian and other troops. He hoped to join the civil war in Russia on the side of the monarchist and White Army who were battling the new Soviet government. Churchill called for the West to intervene to put down the revolution and to



restore the old order. Hence, many Australian, and other, soldiers who might have been demobilised after the Great War found themselves once again in the firing line.

Michael Challenger^{vi} in his study, *Anzacs in Arkangel*, outlines Churchill's championing of this new war immediately after the cessation of the previous catastrophe. "The vehemence of Churchill's public statements was remarkable. At different times he likened the Bolsheviks to blood-sucking vampires, to plagues of locusts, to a phial of typhoid or cholera, and Lenin to a plague bacillus."

One of Churchill's speeches at the time included the following:

"Russia is rapidly being reduced by the Bolsheviks to an animal form of barbarism ... The Bolsheviks maintain themselves by bloody and wholesale butcheries and murders, carried out to a large extent by Chinese executioners ... Civilisation is being extinguished over gigantic areas while Bolsheviks hop and caper like troops of ferocious baboons ..."^{vii}

Churchill pre-empted the Cabinet and authorised a force to be despatched to the civil war. At first the justification was that the new brigade was to ensure a safe withdrawal of troops already stationed near the war zones but these were quickly and quietly transformed into an offensive force. Part of the arsenal of this army was to be gas, a substance that Churchill was to show a particular predilection for. 19 specialist gas officers were sent to North Russia along with 50,000 gas cylinders and 10,000 respirators. Fortunately, the dense forests of North Russia and unsuitable wind conditions meant that gas was not an especially effective ground weapon but later Churchill's aircraft had gas bombs fitted to them and were deployed. Unsurprisingly, Soviet citizens long remembered this early role of Churchill in their country.

At about the same time, Churchill was advocating chemical warfare against Kurds and Afghans. In a memo issued as Minister for War and Air in 1919 he declared that, I cannot understand this squeamishness about the use of gas ... I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes ... gasses can be used which cause great inconvenience and would spread a lively terror"^{viii}.

It was around this time that Churchill is said to have "invented Iraq", creating a nation for British convenience from three conflicting tribal groups inside completely arbitrary borders that have been full of disputation ever since. As Colonial Secretary he simultaneously promised what is now Israel to both Jews and Arabs while describing Palestinians as, "barbaric hordes who ate little but camel dung"^{ix}

Indeed, Churchill's own constituency also cast their own judgement on him as once again these Churchill war obsessions turned into yet more debacles. At the subsequent British election, his electors in his Dundee constituency dumped him in 1922. It would not be the last time British voters issued such a judgement on Churchill. Indeed, it was not even his first election loss having been booted out by his Manchester North constituency in 1908. He is still not well remembered in Dundee with only one small plaque of him in the area to this day.



Needing cash after the election defeat he accepted a fee of 5000 pounds to push the interests of oil companies who were seeking favourable treatment from the British government. Today this would constitute a major scandal.

Between his Wars

The interwar period is sometimes described as Churchill’s wilderness years. Perhaps. In any event, it did not prevent him from being politically active and often repugnant in his views.

He was pathologically opposed to trade unionism and as we have seen quite content to meet their social goals with violent responses. Naturally, he was actively involved in seeking to break the General Strike of the mid-1920’s. Even the International Churchill Society^x concedes his anti-unionism. It concludes that, “As President of the Board of Trade, Home Secretary, and Chancellor of the Exchequer, Churchill had been involved in shaping government policy toward labour disputes and strikes. The General Strike of 1925-1926, and its political implications in particular, had given Churchill strong negative views on the subject”. In fact, Churchill had been turning guns on striking workers and their families well before the 1920’s.

He was an early fan of Benito Mussolini praising, “Fascismo’s triumphant struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism” according to *The New York Times*^{xi}. He was consistent and persistent as a radical rightist using his role as Colonial Secretary to unleash the brutal Black and Tans on Ireland’s Catholic civilians and manifesting lifelong opposition to colonial and coloured peoples.

And this set of obsessions were not even within the temper of his times. Prime Minister Baldwin was warned by members of his own Cabinet not to appoint Churchill because his views were so backward. Even his own doctor, Lord Moran, admitted that when Churchill thinks of other races, “Winston only thinks of the colour of their skin”^{xii}.

Indeed, when Churchill addressed the Palestine Royal Commission he proclaimed: “I do not admit for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not think that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher grade race, a more worldly wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place”^{xiii}.

Hence when India began pressing for greater rights and freedoms it was Churchill at the head of resistance. Of the emerging leader, Gandhi, he held a lifelong contempt from the time he declared of the Indian leader’s campaign of peaceful resistance that he, “ought to be lain bound hand and foot at the gates of Delhi and then trampled on by an enormous elephant with the new Viceroy on his back”^{xiv}.

Churchill was only getting started on Gandhi however. He also had declared that, “It was alarming and nauseating to see Mr Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir ... striding half naked up the steps of the Vice-regal palace”. Later he was to proclaim, “We should be rid of a bad man and an enemy of the Empire if he died”.



This contempt for the lives and aspirations of Indians was to have disastrous consequences in the following decade.

As a historian, it is impossible not to reflect on what was being said and done on questions of race in Germany at exactly the same time as Churchill was holding forth.

Cometh the War

Churchill had spent the latter part of the 1930's warning of the military dangers of appeasement and the inappropriateness of the political strategies that were employed to contain Nazi Germany. He was proved correct in this. He was promoted to national leadership once his discredited predecessors lost credibility.

This is generally regarded as his finest hour. And it was. It is the time to which people look back fondly and wistfully. It was the making of his legacy. Central to this remembrance is the leadership he is said to have manifested principally through the speeches he made over the course of the war.

However, for our purposes we need to examine these speeches in context. Who listened? How were they received? Were they popular at time?

The reality herein is quite different from the myth.

Richard Toye, Professor of History at the University of Exeter uncovers some essential truths in his work *The Roar of the Lion*^{xv} that examines the wartime speeches and their impact. Professor Toye finds that the speeches had become “part of a treasured national myth and this obscured the fact that they often caused disappointment and criticism”. As the conservative London *Daily Telegraph* observed of Toye's conclusions, “the works generated more controversy and criticism than historians have previously thought”^{xvi}.

Toye concludes that, “There is little evidence that they made a decisive difference to the British people's will to fight”. Many thought the prime minister was drunk as he made his “Finest Hour” speech. One MP thought Churchill sounded “ghastly” while the newspaper baron, Cecil King, considered it, “the poorest possible effort”.

Toye also revealed that a survey conducted after Churchill's first broadcast speech on 19 May, 1940, found that it was considered to be inspiring by half of the population and depressing by the other half. As Toye puts it, “Large numbers did feel inspired by his speeches, but a much bigger body of people had a different reaction. This story of near unanimity in the reactions to his speeches is incorrect”. Toye suggests that the ambivalent response to Churchill's oratory partially explains the crushing defeat Churchill suffered at the 1945 General Election months before the war had ended.



“There is this assumption that everyone thought he was a brilliant war leader but did not want him for the peace. Actually, there was more criticism of his war leadership at the time than we think now”.

This post hoc mythologising is exemplified in the perceptions surrounding the Dunkirk “We Will Fight on the Beaches” speech of 4 June 1940. Many folk have looked back wistfully on that speech remembering fondly and clearly where they were when they heard it at that critical time in the war.

This is false memory. It never happened.

This wartime speech was only ever delivered to those in the House of Commons at the time. It was reported on by a BBC journalist. It was quoted in the press. It was never broadcast on radio during the war years. In fact, the sounds of that speech that ring in our ears now are from the first recording made of it in 1949 for posterity.

Meanwhile, in between the speeches, Churchill was very busy providing advice to the Allied generals. He advocated strongly, as we have seen, for a repeat of his lamentable “attack from the South” strategy, despite its clear and tragic failure in World War 1. Still he persisted with his desire to attack Europe via the Mediterranean. As one prominent conservative historian, Antony Beevor, described Churchill, he ‘was a great gentleman amateur’^{xvii}.

As Beevor elaborates, “He [Churchill] took a passionate interest in military operations – in fact rather too much, in the view of his military advisers. A stream of ideas, most of them utterly impractical, poured forth in memos that produced groans and sighs in Whitehall”^{xviii}. Beevor continues to record Churchill’s eccentric behaviour during the launch of the D-Day invasion. Churchill had an obsessive desire to be close to the centre of the action and insisted that he actually sail with the invasion fleet aboard the HMS *Belfast*.

Ultimately to stop Churchill actually getting in the way military leaders had to call on the assistance of the King who made clear to Churchill that he was not to become a spectator to this particular theatre of war. He was surplus to requirements. Not to be entirely thwarted, Churchill ordered up his own personal train to use as a mobile headquarters to be as close as possible to the generals and the soldiers. Fortunately for the war effort Churchill’s train made it no closer than a small railway siding at a station near Portsmouth where he still managed, according to Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, to make, “a thorough pest of himself”.^{xix}

Australia itself often had acrimonious relationships with Churchill over the course of this war as well. The general strategy of Churchill was to win the European war and then focus on the Pacific theatre. The contact between Prime Minister Curtin and Churchill was often hostile and in Curtin’s view, Churchill was often duplicitous. This was featured in the prolonged and heated debates around the return of Australian troops to defend Australia against what was regarded as possible Japanese attack.



Curtin had to insist that the troops be returned from Europe to defend the Australian mainland. As the National Archives of Australia^{xx} chronicle these exchanges, “Churchill gave Curtin a rather disingenuous assurance that he would take a personal interest in the return of the 9th division, but Curtin already had good reason to doubt Churchill’s sincerity”. He had indeed. Despite previous commitments Churchill also sought secretly to redirect returning Australian troops of the 6th and 7th Divisions to Burma. Had they done so they would certainly have been taken captive by the Japanese who were in command there by this point. Fortunately, Curtin prevailed and the Australian troops returned to fight on the home front.

In both wars, Australia had little to thank Churchill for.

India

The most significant and under-reported role of Churchill during World War II certainly relates to India. In a recent major work^{xxi}, Shashi Tharoor, chronicles the role of Churchill in relation to India over this period.

While military necessity required as much support from India as possible in a number of theatres of war, Churchill insisted that Indian leaders and figures from the Congress Party should be gaoled because of their support for moves towards Indian independence. This at a time when Singapore had fallen as had Burma. Recruitment and allies were vital. Japanese forces were approaching the borders of India. Yet Churchill’s motives were a constant. As he declared, “I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion”.

Still Churchill was obdurate. Nehru and Gandhi should remain in gaol. As an incoming British Viceroy conceded, the British government’s attitude to India had been, “negligent, hostile and contemptuous to a degree I had not anticipated”. Eventually the War Cabinet overruled Churchill on the matter of the imprisonment of the Indian leaders but far worse was to come in the summer and autumn of 1943.

By this point a famine had begun to break out in Bengal. Local officials pleaded to Churchill’s government to remedy the situation. Churchill refused. Famine in Bengal ensued.

As Tharoor records,

“By the time it ended, nearly 4 million Bengalis starved to death in the 1943 famine. Nothing can excuse the odious behaviour of Winston Churchill, who deliberately ordered the diversion of food from starving Indian civilians to well supplied British soldiers and even to top up European stockpiles in Greece and elsewhere. ‘The starvation of anyway underfed Bengalis is less serious’ Churchill argued...”

When reminded of the suffering of his victims his response was typically Churchillian: The famine was their own fault, he said for ‘breeding like rabbits’. When officers of conscience pointed out in a telegram to the prime minister the scale of the tragedy caused by his decisions, Churchill’s only reaction was to ask peevishly: ‘why hasn’t Gandhi died yet?’



As Madhusree Mukerjee’s richly documented account of the Bengal Famine demonstrates, India’s own surplus foodgrains were exported to Ceylon; Australian wheat was sent sailing past Indian cities (where the bodies of those who had died of starvation littered the streets) to storage depots in the Mediterranean and the Balkans, to create stockpiles that could ease the pressure on post-war Britain, and offers of American and Canadian food were turned down. The colony was not permitted to spend its own sterling reserves, or indeed use its own ships, to import food. Even the laws of supply and demand couldn’t help: in order to ensure supplies for its troops elsewhere, the British government paid inflated prices for grain in the Indian open market, thereby making it unaffordable for ordinary Indians”.

Churchill’s racism had murderous consequences.

Postwar

As World War II headed towards its conclusion the British people took its first opportunity in the 1945 General Election to decisively sweep Churchill from office. As Richard Toye observed that was not simply because he was regarded as an unsuitable peacetime leader unfit to build a better and fairer world for his nation but also because of the residual antipathy to his role as a wartime leader. Churchill was astute enough at the time to ensure that his version of history became predominant and he spent his early postwar period writing his take on his role in history and later finalising his *History of the English Speaking Peoples*.

He returned to the Prime Ministership in 1951 but was again rejected in 1955. His postwar political involvement was characterised by his opposition to Indian independence and later as PM he oversaw the violent suppression of Kenya’s anti-colonial Mau Mau uprising that featured the hearing of thousands of Kenyans into concentration camps. Churchill was unabashed in his views on Anglo supremacy, his deep antipathy to nations and peoples involved in the postwar anti-colonial movement and his longing for a return to Empire.

He became an enthusiastic Cold War Warrior, popularising the term “Iron Curtain” that he had borrowed from Josef Goebbels. Unsurprisingly, he became a hit among rightwing and warlike Americans. Kennedy was the first US president to invoke Churchill. (Unsurprisingly, Eisenhower who had experienced him up close did not). Lyndon Johnson was apparently fortified by the Churchill warrior myth and used it to justify his escalation in Vietnam. Ronald Reagan used Churchill to justify his economic policies while George W Bush had a bust of Churchill in his office and was exceedingly fond of quoting him when promoting the invasion of Iraq^{xxii}.

As the *New Yorker* describes this development, “In American conservative circles, he is still El Cid with a cigar, hoisted up on his horse to confront the latest existential threat to Western civilisation”^{xxiii}.

Across this time period the Churchill cult began to take hold. The waves of books, films, television shows and popular culture references began to rise and surge. They now just keep coming



notwithstanding the reality that so many of them are, to use Geoffrey Wheatcroft’s description, “fantasies ... encrustations of mythologizing and hero worship”.

What can be done?

Fantasies, encrustations and mythologising have no place in our classrooms. One of the reasons the case study of Churchill is applied is to indicate how deeply and how longstanding existing myth can sustain itself through repetition and multi-media elaboration.

As we move with our students towards an understanding of how best to approach the diverse forms of new and traditional forms of knowledge, information and opinion we have particular responsibility -- across the curriculum and across all age and ability ranges. Indeed some of our battling, possibly less sceptical, students need our guidance in these domains more than most.

All of our learning areas and subjects require this special care. In English and literacy we need vigilance to assess the role of language and its deployment in modern day deceit. Our students need to understand the proper place of food, nutrition and exercise in their future seeped as they are in nonsense and fads and furphies in all manner of media. Our students deserve to be educated in the rightful place of mathematics and scientific method as they consider the realities of climate change in the current sea of disinformation and self-interest.

More than at any time in history our students deserve a secular, rational, pluralist, sceptical education to navigate their futures; to analyse spin and propositions that will confront them – online, in the media, from marketers, from politicians, on their phone, in books and in the diverse communication forms owned and controlled by self-interested billionaires.

It is within our power. It can be unlocked by adherence to our principles, our methodologies, and the rationales within our syllabuses. By the universal application of reason.

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ⁱ See Paul F. Boller jr Not So Oxford University Press New York 1995

ⁱⁱ See Eric Hobsbawm The Invention of Tradition Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1983



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- iii Hobsbawm p 26
iv Hobsbawm pp 101-164
v Johann Hari “The Independent” 28 October 2010
vi Michael Challenger Anzacs in Arkangel Hardie Grant Prahran 2010
vii Challenger p 8
viii www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29701767 accessed 10 January 2017
ix See Hari
x www.winstonchurchill.org/support?catid=0&id=762 accessed 10 January 2017
xi “The New York Times” January 21, 1927
xii See Hari
xiii www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29701767 accessed 10 January 2017
xiv *ibid*
xv Richard Toye The Roar of the Lion Oxford University Press Oxford 2013
xvi www.telegraph.co.uk/history/britain-at-war/10255153
xvii Antony Beevor D-Day The Battle for Normandy Viking London
xviii Beevor p 15
xix Beevor pp 15-19
xx See <http://vroom.naa.gov.au/ID=24246> accessed October 4 2018
xxi Shashi Tharoor Inglorious Empire Scribe London 2016
xxii See Geoffrey Wheatcroft “A Star is Born” in “The New York Review” January 18 2018
xxiii Adam Gopnik “Finest Hours” in “The New Yorker” 30 August 2010