

An Unwanted Present

The question of what to do with an unwanted birthday present is something that most of us have wrestled with. Many people quietly resort to the use of a waste paper bin, a cupboard or charity shop to solve the dilemma. But Winston Churchill, Britain's indomitable leader during the Second World War and world famous statesman, faced a more difficult decision when, in his last years, he reflected on what to do with an important portrait of himself that he utterly loathed.

The public profile of the portrait – and the difficulty of disowning it – could hardly have been bigger. It was commissioned and paid for by members of parliament to mark his eightieth birthday. Churchill had had an extraordinary career in the House of Commons. He had been first elected as an MP in 1900, and held senior cabinet positions in a number of governments before becoming prime minister in 1940 and again, despite his age and growing health problems, in 1951. Members of both houses of parliament wanted to mark his long years of public service and hit upon the idea of commissioning a full scale portrait that they would present to Churchill on the day of his eightieth birthday in 1954 in a public ceremony.

Paid for not by the state but by private donations, the commissioning of the portrait was an unprecedented gesture, based on all party respect and admiration for the serving Prime Minister. As Clement Atlee, Leader of the Opposition, said at the grand presentation ceremony, in which the portrait was unveiled, it was a 'tribute of esteem and affection to a most distinguished member of our parliamentary family'. Filmed by the BBC, Churchill responded to the historical significance of the event in his acceptance speech.

This is to me the most memorable public occasion of my life. No-one has ever received a similar mark of honour before. There has not been anything like it in British history ... I am now nearing the end of my journey. I hope I still have some services to render. However that may be and whatever may befall, I am sure I shall never forget the emotions of this day or be able fully to express my gratitude to those colleagues and companions with whom I have lived my life for this wonderful honour they have done me.

But he had little to say about the portrait itself. He described the canvas evasively as 'a remarkable example of modern art'. Acknowledging that it was less than flattering, he managed to get a laugh from the packed audience in Westminster Hall by adding with perfect timing, 'it certainly combines force with candour. These are qualities which no active member of either House can do without or should fear to meet.' A performer,

Churchill was putting a brave face on things but he was profoundly upset and shocked by the portrait: for many days he had been privately threatening not to come to the presentation ceremony.

Things had begun to go wrong from the very beginning. Born into the aristocracy and proud of the offices of state he had occupied, Churchill had hoped to be portrayed wearing the grand robes of the Order of the Garter. Instead, the parliamentarians who had commissioned the portrait specified that he be shown wearing his normal parliamentary clothes of black coat, waistcoat, striped trousers and spotted bow tie. It was an early sign of differing expectations about the portrait, and Churchill found himself obliged to concede the point.??The artist commissioned to undertake the portrait was Graham Sutherland, a leading British painter who had a reputation for being a modernist but who had also recently undertaken some portraits of leading political and literary figures. Sutherland aimed neither to flatter nor to denigrate but rather – and herein lay the danger for his sitters – to capture something of the truth of a person. He talked of himself being at the mercy of his sitters, whose moods and expressions dictated what the portrait would look like. But his willingness to present unflattering aspects, to capture people in informal, unconsidered poses, caused sitters some awkward moments, as he later acknowledged:

I think it is true that only those totally without physical vanity, educated in painting or with exceptionally good manners can disguise their feelings of shock or even revulsion when they are confronted for the first time with a reasonably truthful painted portrait of themselves.

Many people have the fixed idea that my portraits are cruel. I do not aim to make them so ... but I do look at the person whose characteristics I try to record.

Needing to complete the portrait before Churchill's birthday on 30 November, Sutherland went to Churchill's home Chartwell, near Westerham in Kent, for the first of the sittings in late August. During the sessions – there were less than ten in all – he drew pencil and charcoal sketches of Churchill, particularly his face and hands, and produced a small number of oil studies. The photographer Elsbeth Juda was also asked to take photographs of Churchill in his portrait pose for the painter's use. Each day Sutherland would then return to his own studio where he kept the large canvas and try to capture different aspects of Churchill's face and expression based on his memory, his sketches and the photographs.

During the sittings the two men talked amicably about a range of topics: Churchill was an amateur painter and took a close interest in the work and in how he was being portrayed. However, Sutherland did not like showing him how things were developing and fobbed him off as politely as he could with drawings that he did not mind showing. Significantly, these did not give Churchill any sense of what the final portrait would look like.

Sutherland was slightly in awe of Churchill, and saw in the aged politician the great ‘bull dog’ who had saved Britain during the war. He was also very aware of the current discussions in both Conservative and Labour camps about whether Churchill should step down because of his age and poor health (that spring the *Daily Mirror* had called the prime minister ‘the Giant in Decay’). Churchill was vexed about this, and during the sittings complained angrily. Sutherland later said:

Repeatedly I was told: ‘They (meaning his colleagues in the Government) want me out. But’ – and this is a paraphrase of the actual conversation – ‘I’m a rock’; and at that the face would set in furious lines and the hands clutch the arms of the chair.

It was no coincidence therefore that Sutherland chose a large squarish canvas for the portrait. Beyond echoing the pose of the sculpture of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial, Sutherland later explained, ‘I wanted to paint him with a kind of four-square look – Churchill as a rock’. Perhaps, for all his later protestations, Sutherland did not just paint what he saw, but was influenced by this conception he had of the great man.

Intimations of trouble came when those who saw the portrait reported mixed feelings. Churchill’s son Randolph thought his mother would not like it as it made Churchill look ‘disenchanted’. Randolph’s wife June thought it ‘really quite alarmingly like him’ but added in her letter to Sutherland, ‘I wish he didn’t have to look quite so cross, although I know he often does’. (Jude’s photographs are evidence that Churchill could indeed look cross and disenchanted without necessarily meaning to, but that he also smiled and was jovial during the sittings.)

Still Sutherland did not show the work to Churchill, despite having been asked to do so. On 20 November – only ten days before the official presentation – Churchill’s wife saw the work and brought back a photograph to show Sir Winston. He was upset and angered, and, at the risk of upsetting the plans for the grand unveiling ceremony, sent a handwritten note to Sutherland by prime ministerial limousine the next day, courteously but firmly rejecting the work. ‘Personally I am quite content that any impression of me by you should be on record’, he wrote. ‘I feel however that there will be an acute difference of opinion about this portrait and that it will bring an element of controversy into a function that was intended to be a matter of general agreement between the Members of the House of Commons, where I have lived my life. Therefore I am of opinion that the painting, however masterly in execution, is not suitable as a Presentation from both Houses of Parliament. I hope therefore that a statement can be agreed between us which will be accepted by the Committee.’ Churchill indicated that the ceremony could go ahead simply with the presentation of the book signed by contributors, though ‘it is sad there will be no portrait’. Sutherland sent a note back expressing his regret but saying that he had painted honestly what he saw, a line he stuck to whenever discussing this portrait or portraiture in general. He later said: ‘Churchill often showed me the greatest charm and could not have been kinder ... But I draw what I see; and 90 per cent of the time I was shown precisely what I recorded.’

So what did Churchill object to? From comments that have been recorded, it seems that the way his body had been shown sitting, somewhat slumped, in the chair struck him as offensive in its lack of dignity (he compared the position to that of sitting on a lavatory). The unflinching gaze and the lopsided mouth disappointingly suggested that the painter had seen little nobility or charm in his sitter, though the parliamentarians who had commissioned the work had done so as a token of their affection for him. Churchill was reputed to have said that the portrait made him look half-witted, but he may also have been privately anxious about the portrait revealing the stroke he had had the previous year which he had so far successfully hidden from the general public. Although he always remained on civil terms with Sutherland, he also felt betrayed on a personal level, thinking that the painter, to whom he had displayed much politeness, should have shown him the work earlier, and that in not doing so, he had been pulling a fast one. Churchill may also have suspected that, as someone with contacts with the Labour party, Sutherland may even have been politically motivated at some level in choosing to depict him as decrepit: the portrait seemed to echo the message of those who argued that he should step down. Finally, it was too painful for a proud man with an acute sense of his place in history to consider such an unflattering representation of him in his old age hanging permanently in the Palace of Westminster (it was intended to be installed there after Churchill's death).

Over the next few days, however, the secretary to the Committee that had commissioned the work and was organising the presentation persuaded Churchill that he simply could not decline the portrait without giving huge and lasting offence to those who had contributed to its cost, and reluctantly he agreed.

Reactions to the portrait when it was unveiled at the grand presentation ceremony and press images were released were mixed. Those who admired Sutherland as a modern, uncompromising artist felt it was a great work. The *Spectator* critic said it would remain 'by far the best record of the Prime Minister which we shall bequeath to posterity'. While noting that the legs strangely faded out towards the bottom of the painting, The *Times* critic said it was a 'powerful and penetrating image'. Labour MP Henry Osborne noted that it might come to be regarded as the greatest portrait of the century, though most members had wanted to give not a great painting but one that Churchill himself would like. Others, however, were virulent in their dislike. Lord Hailsham said, 'If I had my way, I'd throw Graham Sutherland into the Thames. The portrait is a complete disgrace ... It is bad-mannered; it is a filthy colour'. Sutherland and his wife had to endure exposure to these very public criticisms, knowing that the subject and many of his friends hated the work. Interviewed on the radio three days after the presentation ceremony, Sutherland felt obliged to explain his predicament as a portraitist in relation to what was rapidly being seen as a watershed moment in the history of British portraiture: 'I want neither to flatter nor to denigrate. Least of all do I want to soil and mortify.'

Seen by people for only a few days, the canvas was despatched to Chartwell where it was unpacked but never hung. Sir Winston and Lady Churchill refused to allow the

work to be exhibited or indeed reproduced, and for two decades no-one saw the work. His daughter Mary Soames believed that the experience had amounted to a culture shock for him: Sutherland had ignored the image of Churchill as a great figure, which was known throughout the world, and had shown the image of a man in decline in a manner that arguably displayed little respect for the sitter's past or personal feelings.

Churchill died in 1965; his wife Clementine in 1977. Sutherland's requests to include it in exhibitions of his work were ignored; in an interview in 1975 he talked of his fear that Lady Churchill had destroyed the painting. His intuition was proved correct when her executors confirmed that this indeed was the case, explaining that she had been distressed to see how much the picture, which both she and Sir Winston disliked, preyed on her husband's mind. According to a later report, it seems that within a year of the work's arrival at Chartwell, Clementine Churchill had smashed the work to pieces in the cellar and had given the pieces to an employee to burn in an incinerator. In effect, Lady Churchill had acted like another person might do when given a present felt to be tasteless, ugly or useless. But this was a work of art not a mass produced, replaceable object: by any standards the portrait was a significant work of art by one of Britain's leading painters.

Sutherland was quick to denounce the brutal destruction as 'without question an act of vandalism'. Roy Strong, Director of the Victoria & Albert Museum, noted that if the portrait was the property of the Churchill family, they could 'of course' do as they wished with it. 'But an artist tears something out of himself when he paints a portrait and to burn it is like burning a chunk of Sutherland.' Letters to the press generally took the view that Lady Churchill did not have the right to destroy a work of art, even a disturbing and upsetting one, but should simply have put it in the attic and let posterity decide its fate, though there were many who admired her loyalty to her husband. The art critic and writer David Sylvester reflected the debate neatly:

I do not think we have the right to feel we own the works of art we have, any more than the spouse we have. Therefore we should not kill them off just because we do not like them. Still, it is arguable that a portrait of oneself, or of someone near and dear, is a special case.

Debated hotly within the press, the case famously obliged the nation to ask whether it mattered that this particular portrait of Sir Winston no longer existed. The answer was a 'yes', albeit with some sympathy for the perpetrator of its destruction.

Text—
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