

A Christmas with Winston

Corinne Desarzens

Novel

French



When it comes to Churchill, so much ink has been spilled that it would seem there is little left to say. However, it's not Churchill Corinne Desarzens wants to tell us about. It's Winston she's interested in. Winston is the man behind the Prime Minister – the disappointed father, the wearer of antelope-skin slippers, the gambler, the bon vivant. Corinne Desarzens has formed an attachment to this captivating man and has brought him back to life in an innovative 'show-not-tell' approach to the biographical form.

"Is this a mere detail? It's difficult to avoid the pitfalls between the material and the immaterial, to navigate through the jagged rocks that are the words relevant and irrelevant. Winston's interest in these pigs is suggestive of his predisposition for surrounding himself with interesting, intelligent and entertaining characters and individuals, irrespective of class."

Title

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Born in Sète in 1952, Corinne Desarzens is a Franco-Swiss writer and journalist with a degree in Russian. Passionate about languages and the art of capturing conversations, she's a sometime translator, author of novels, short stories and travelogues including *Un Roi* (Grasset, 2011) and *L'Italie, c'est toujours bien* (La Baconnière, 2017). She is among the great stylists of French-speaking Switzerland. She received one of the Swiss Literature Awards in 2021.

Photo: HOMLausanne

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Excerpt translated by Ros Schwartz

454 btls champagne

311 btls wine/s

58 btls brandy

56 of Black Label

58 of sherry

69 of port

(April and May 1949, at Chartwell, investigation closed)

Just as a foreign city becomes a universe as soon as you know one person who lives there, causing your gaze to seek out the very slightest mention of that city, so an interest in a particular name immediately transports you to a vast constellation. It is a fixed star, all the brighter if it lights up when you least expect it.

Confessing to choosing a Winston biography as bedside reading elicits smiles of approbation at the prospect of roping up to climb a high mountain, with ample provisions.

Unless Churchill's very name cools the mood. The statue, too imposing; the marble, too slippery, the gaze, too preoccupied, too difficult to dismiss altogether; that sweat of dread. There is a mere whiff of stale cigar, of mothballs, of all those nearly-forgotten smells, horsehair and wet grass, sulphur and typewriter ribbons, stencils and dead leaves gathered in a smouldering heap. That serious mind, the sudden gravity cast like sand on an incipient fire, the eruptions of laughter, and the sorrows, the bursts of enthusiasm and excessive joys.

A bon vivant. Crude image. Simply alive. Buddha belly. Jowls in a starched collar and pyjamas. Some subjects already exhausted, overly beribboned, still mired in

dubious company and questionable decisions. Curnonsky, "the Prince of Gastronomy". Chaplin, ultimately as sinister as he was acrobatic. Those years. Finished, the boozing days, when masculinity as yet unmaligned was epitomised by heroic figures such as Roosevelt, Hemingway, and Winston. According to a Norwegian psychiatrist, who inspired the Danish film-maker Thomas Vinterberg, human beings now suffered a blood-alcohol deficit that prevented them from fully developing their potential. A false theory or misinterpretation that does not stop us questioning the virtues, if any, of drunkenness. As a young Conservative MP, Angus Maude recalled Winston saying: "The secret of the drinker is to drink a little too much at a time".

Certainly Winston didn't confine himself to drinking water, but he'd made a deal with his own body. A deal of mutual satisfaction rather than a question of masculinity. Something gentle. Here we sit talking, listening to each other, stringing sentences together, some even jostling each other, without causing suffering, hoping for a drink that will take the right path and branch off at the right time, savouring it if it makes itself known. Here we are, nourished by the air when others no longer are, continuing to crave one thing and its opposite, according to the whim of our heart. Going so far as to allow that desire to make our destiny smile.

His favourite target, though, remained the temperance movement. To the Mormon who declined a whisky and soda and asked: "May I have some water instead, Sir Winston? What the lions drink." He replied: "So do donkeys." Another Mormon muttered: "Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper" (Proverbs 23:32). And Winston retorted, to the delight of his private secretary: "I've been looking for a drink like that for years!"

Most of all, Winston always lived in the present and derived great satisfaction from seeing the temperance campaigners and vegetarians die out around him, people such as the Archbishop of Canterbury – at the tender age of sixty-three.

And the year of his death? And the number of his children? Grown-ups love numbers. When you tell them about a new friend, they never ask you about the important things. They never say: "What does his voice sound like? Does he like rain? What are his favourite places?" Instead, they want to know his age, whether he has any brothers, how much he weighs and how much his father earns.

The burdens grow heavier – the increasing bitterness, the inadequacy of his own knowledge, and his remorse for lingering at table once again, while the account given of a fiasco unites everyone, in the relief of the chaos, the ardour, the respite, and in outbursts of laughter. The dry and tasteless quails served to Molotov [at Chequers in June 1942] is the latest news.

Winston invigorates you with the very lust for life.

On a rainy May morning in 2021, a young notary from the Swiss town of Sion explains the name of his town's car park, "La Cible" (the Target), avowing his taste for history, for the 800 pages of a Wellington biography, and another, even fatter, which he first contemplated from a distance before venturing to test it out, an expanse of water still cold in spring, which you approach gingerly, dipping your fingertips. He touches it, half-opens it and puts it down, weighs it, paces round it, and in the end is happy to dive in: a biography of Churchill.

At the lunch that follows the signing – a delicious pot-au-feu spiced up with horseradish sauce – the broker's wife asks the guests if they can identify the main ingredient of the dessert. Liquorice? Not far wrong: absinthe from Val-de-Travers.

Then there is mention of Jacques Pitteloud, a lieutenant-colonel and former secret agent who has been appointed Swiss ambassador to Washington. He is suddenly a huge hit in the States for his passionate interest in birds. Before stepping out in suit and tie, this tall, burly man rushes through his work phone calls at the crack of dawn before going out into the wild to take photos of passerines and owls returning from the hunt. He would like to be reincarnated as a peregrine falcon: an extraordinary

bird of prey that's fast, beautiful and strong. He is a bird of prey too, and similarly endowed, in multi-pocketed fatigues, with tanned forearms and not a single tattoo, his eye misting at the sight of a painted bunting. And the Washington Post celebrates the birder over the ambassador.

The crack of dawn, the wee hours, are his, before official duty calls.

He's on the alert, our man, for a rare sighting. His reaction, quick as lightning. Here he is, cautiously approaching the edge of the meadow at dawn, when no one can see him. Mockery? Contempt? Tell no one what was said in this meadow, nor by whom . . . But it is not in fact true that no one wants to hear about impressions of nature. It is probably the most precious and universal thing left.

The photos are all very well, but Ambassador Pitteloud regrets not having the gift of a mathematical mind. Nevertheless, it is the tanned forearms wielding the enormous telephoto lens that make the biggest impact. The photos are slick. The questions thick and fast.

"Your Excellency," a journalist breaks in, "are you more of a Kentucky bourbon man? Or is apricot brandy from the Valais your tippie?"

The Valais-born ambassador is embarrassed, but decides to plump for bourbon, which he definitely prefers to fruit brandies.

An ex-secret agent, after all, even a Swiss one, has to keep away from grenadine. He feels like saying nothing.

He thinks of that slight comma on Albert Bierstadt's giant two-by-three-metre painting: a bald eagle outlined against a golden cliff, under the weight of a stormy sky. First of all, is it really a bald eagle? Is it the eagle of the dollar bills or a vulture imposter? What about the irregularities of its silhouette? Or the singularity of the existence of this scavenger, so deeply woven into the sky that it has to glide to eat, while taking advantage of thermal updrafts to save itself as much effort as possible?

He senses the next question coming. The dew on the meadow, all very well, but he misses the hilly terrain, the obbly bridge and that hazardous little section. He will answer differently. He prefers a different drill to that insidious desire to want to do exactly what he is told, both here and back home. A particular hankering.

“Who would you have liked to be?”

“I have boundless admiration for Winston Churchill, despite all his faults.”