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“Getting to Know You”: First Dinners with Winston Churchill

By CITA STELZER July 14, 2022



“Winston at Table,” cartoon by Vicky, 1930s. (Wikimedia Commons)

First dinners

In *Dinner With Churchill: Policy Making At The Dinner Table* I concentrated on dinners at which Churchill met with military, political and social elites to promote his policies and ideas— and not primarily to entertain them with his rich prose. All of those guests previously knew him, or of

him. But recently I wondered about first impressions: How did Churchill introduce himself? What were the reactions at dinners from those who had never met him? Here are a few. They tell us much about the man.

Bourke Cockran: New York City, 1895

In late 1895, Lt. Churchill, aged 20, landed in New York City on his first visit to the United States. He was en route to accompany Spanish troops fighting rebels seeking independence for Cuba. His goals were adventure, fame, and fees as a [war reporter for London's Daily Graphic](#). His first dinners began a friendship that was to contribute to those goals, and much more.

He was met at the pier by Bourke Cockran, Democrat congressman, friend (and reportedly a lover) of his mother. Cockran had recently left Paris after spending some time there with Jennie, Lady Randolph Churchill, as she had become. He had told her he would be delighted to meet Winston if her son ever visited America.¹

True to his word, Cockran met Churchill and installed him and his fellow subaltern, [Lt. Reginald Barnes](#), in his elegant 763 Fifth Avenue apartment. Their first dinner established a mutual admiration that lasted far beyond Cockran's death in 1923. Long after Cockran had faded from memory, Churchill was quoting him. Most notably this occurred during his famous "Iron Curtain" speech in Missouri in 1946:

...there is no reason except human folly or sub-human crime which should deny to all the nations the inauguration and enjoyment of an age of plenty. I have often used words which I learned fifty years ago from a great Irish-American orator, a friend of mine, Mr. Bourke Cockran: "There is enough for all. The earth is a generous mother; she will provide in plentiful abundance food for all her children if they will but cultivate her soil in justice and in peace."²

Even in old age, Churchill was quoting Cockran to a twice-nominated Democrat candidate for President, [Adlai Stevenson](#). Stevenson had to be reminded of who Cockran was.

A friendship of equals

There would be many other consequential first dinners, but the one with Cockran clearly must rank first. Not that they always agreed. One debate involved the assignment Churchill had



William Bourke Cockran, 1854-1923, photographed circa 1901.
(Wikimedia)

sought in Cuba—"in search of adventure," as he put it in a letter to his mother.³ Young Winston was attached to the Spanish, but at best non-committal about Spain in Cuba. Cockran was with the rebels.

No ordinary politician, Cockran proved to be an important link in Churchill's American network. He spoke several languages, could fill a large hall when he was scheduled to speak. He was widely read and had carefully reasoned views on the issues of the day.⁴ He soon introduced young Winston to leading members of the bar, and other important Americans. Tours arranged by Cockran saw the young Englishmen visit fire stations, the ironclad cruiser *New York*, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and other military installations. The planned one-day stopover in New York extended into several. Then it was off to Cuba, Cockran arranging first class rail accommodations to Tampa. From Churchill and Barnes sailed for Havana.

Over the years their long correspondence was to cover an astonishing range of topics with clarity and incisiveness. As with Cuba, the reflexive imperialist and the liberal congressman would often disagree, as they did, for example, on Irish Home Rule. But never did their differences sour the relationship between them. Both understood the value of a friendship of equals that allowed for political differences. This was characteristic of Churchill. Throughout his life, he never allowed political disagreements to end a friendship.

Theodore Roosevelt: Albany, 1900

Not all first dinners were resounding successes. Churchill returned to the United States in 1900, this time to lecture on his South Africa adventures. Again he stayed with Cockran, who again introduced him to the great and the good. On 10 December he dined with New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt, who had just been elected [William McKinley](#)'s Vice-President. "TR," then 42, would succeed McKinley after the President's assassination in 1901. Churchill too had recently been elected, as Member of Parliament for Oldham. He was hoping his lecture tour would restore his finances and pay off his campaign debts.

Roosevelt himself had invited Churchill that evening. "I am a great admirer of Mr. Churchill's books and should very much like to have a chance of meeting him socially," he wrote Major Pond, Churchill's American agent. "I should very much like to have him take lunch or dinner with me.... Where shall I write him?"⁵

"Not an attractive fellow..."

The admiration did not survive the dinner. "He is not an attractive fellow," wrote Roosevelt to a family friend, the start of a years-long string of invectives: "I dislike the father and I dislike the son.... A man I dislike and despise.... A rather cheap character [who led] a cheap and vulgar life." When WSC was Home Secretary (1910-11), Roosevelt visited London. "I have refused to meet Winston Churchill," he wrote.⁶

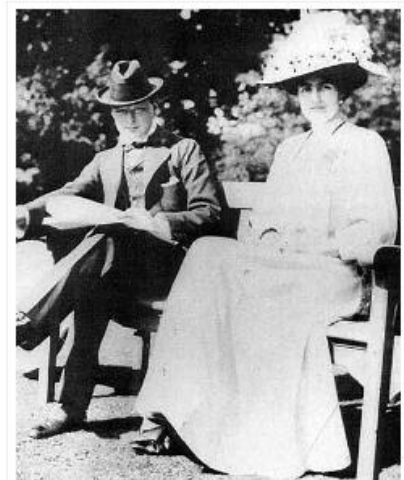
Guesses as to the cause vary. One is that likes repelled. Both both had charged up hills under fire, both wrote books. Another is that Churchill might have failed to be sufficiently deferential toward Roosevelt, assuming an equality that offended the hierarchical-minded TR. Remarkably, the dislike was entirely one-sided. Churchill seemingly never thought about that dinner again. In 1908 he sent the President, a fellow big-game hunter, an inscribed copy of his travelogue, *My African Journey*. "I do not like Winston Churchill but I supposed I ought to write him," Roosevelt wrote the U.S. Ambassador. His letter was perfectly cordial.⁷

Fortunately for America, Britain and, indeed, the world, Churchill would get along better with the other President Roosevelt, though *their* first meeting in 1917 had not gone well either. "He acted like a stinker," FDR said, "lording it all over us."⁸ The Second World War would bring them together, and FDR began to appreciate his British counterpart, while aware that his wartime partner was not without flaws that sometimes made their relationship difficult.

Clementine Hozier, Mayfair, London, 1904

Crewe House in Mayfair's Curzon Street is now part of the embassy of Saudi Arabia. Years ago this elegant 18th century mansion was the private residence of Lord and Lady Crewe. Here in 1904, Winston Churchill first set eyes on the love of his life. Clementine Hozier was then 19, Winston 29. She was tall, he was shorter. She was beautiful, he could not be described as handsome.

Winston arrived with his mother Jennie, Lady Randolph, a social lioness, to attend a ball given by the Crewes. Winston asked his mother to introduce him "to the vision which had so powerfully beguiled him." Jennie, who "knew everybody," did as asked. Winston could only stare. He didn't shake her hand or ask her to dance.⁹ Disconcerted, Clementine signaled to a beau, who asked her to dance. Leading her away, he asked her what she was doing talking to "that frightful fellow Winston Churchill."¹⁰



Winston and Clementine after their engagement, 1908. (Wikimedia Commons)

Four years later her parents had separated, and financial problems dictated that Clementine and her mother live in Dieppe. Returning to London, Clementine's finances required her to earn money by giving French lessons, a lesson in penury that would haunt her when she married one of the great financial profligates of his time.

Clementine was even more beautiful at 23 than she'd been when Winston first spied her. Her daughter proudly notes that observers commented on her "superbly sculptured

features."¹¹ Later a courtier to the Sovereign, [Sir Alan Lascelles](#), recalled "a vision so radiant, that even now, after 61 years, my always roving, fastidious eye, has never seen another vision to beat it."¹² Clementine was also "lively and enthusiastic [and] entirely lacking in self-consciousness."¹³

A second chance

One night in March 1908, Clementine received a last-minute invitation to dine at the home of society hostess [Lady St Helier](#), a friend of hers and Lady Randolph's. In that era women spent extraordinary energy and money on clothes. Clementine initially declined for lack of sufficiently elegant attire, but her mother insisted that she accept. She did, only to find the seat on her right at the dinner table vacant. It was assigned to Winston, who was late as usual. His private secretary, Edward Marsh, remembered that he lingered in the bath, reluctant to attend what he thought would be a "bore."¹⁴

Winston arrived halfway through dinner, full of excuses, and took his place next to Clementine. Soon they were engaged in rapt conversation—or at least Winston was. After the gentlemen joined the ladies following their cigars, Winston went directly to Clemmie and spent the remainder of the evening talking with her. He prevailed on Lady Randolph to invite her to her home at Salisbury Hall, near St. Albans. Churchill was running for Parliament in Dundee, and their correspondence was full of election news and prospects. He won handily on May 9th. Three months later his cousin the Duke of Marlborough invited Clementine to Blenheim Palace, and there on August 11th she and Winston became engaged.

The 57-year marriage resulting from those two dinners is widely recorded, not least by [Lady Diana Cooper](#), who deeply admired them both. It provided the mutual love and reinforcement that enabled them to survive the storms of a troubled century. As Churchill wrote in his autobiography, "I married and lived happily ever after."

Franklin Roosevelt: Placentia Bay, 1941

Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940, a grim time for Britain. He knew at the outset that his best chance—if not his only chance—was to bring the United States into the World War. But America then was in no mood to have its sons fight in another foreign struggle. Campaigning for reelection in November, President Roosevelt promised he would never send Americans on such a mission. FDR had to contend with strong isolationist sentiment, aggravated by the fact that American participation in the Great War had not prevented another.

Churchill knew the President also faced considerable anti-British feeling among two important voting blocs. Many German-Americans had not yet grasped the horror prevailing in their former homeland. Irish-Americans were born and bred to be anti-British. All this persuaded Churchill that his long correspondence with FDR was no substitute for a face-to-face meeting. In early

1941, Roosevelt's emissary [Harry Hopkins](#) had assured him the President agreed. Given his past successes at crucial dinners, Churchill expected great things for his meeting with the President.

On 9 August HMS *Prince of Wales* sailed into Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, carrying Churchill and his top military advisors. Roosevelt had arrived earlier on USS *Augusta*. As *Augusta's* band struck up "God Save the Queen," FDR remarked that he had never heard "My Country 'Tis of Thee" played so well. Churchill crossed over to the President's ship, shook hands with Roosevelt, and handed him a letter from George VI. After a brief lunch he accepted the President's invitation to the first of their dinners that night.

Dinners that set the course for victory

The dinners were twofold: the two heads of government alone, their military staffs at another table. Here they made the first tentative steps toward a combined management of the war effort. That plan was implemented during Churchill's long, multiple-dinner stays in the White House after Pearl Harbor in 1941-42.

That first dinner at Placentia Bay was followed by a joint statement of Allied goals, known as the [Atlantic Charter](#). Churchill, with India in mind, swallowed hard before signing on to a Wilsonian promise of national self-determination. But he was not prepared to sacrifice his first-dinner triumph to future concerns.

Placentia Bay has to be counted with the Bourke Cockran and Clementine Hozier first dinners as extraordinarily consequential. They meant as much to Churchill personally as to the world at large. Cockran provided introductions and intellectual nourishment. Clementine provided emotional support, much love, calming advice and vital home intelligence when her husband was away. Roosevelt provided the military support that allowed Churchill to mold the "Grand Alliance" that would crush the Axis. It was to the third major partner in that alliance that he next turned his attention.



USS "Augusta" dinner menu, 9 August
(From "Dinner With Churchill," by permission of the author)

Joseph Stalin: Moscow, 1942

Churchill arrived in Moscow late in the evening of 12 August 1942. At his assigned dacha, a feast had been laid out for him. Not willing to waste a minute, Churchill insisted that he visit that night with Stalin—their first meeting—after a bath and feeding the dacha's goldfish.

Churchill had two reasons for anticipating a tough slog in Moscow. First was his longstanding and well-known hostility to Bolshevism and all that Stalin represented. Of course he understood where the priority was. "If Hitler invaded hell," he had promised "a favourable reference to the devil...."¹⁵ His second problem was that he was bringing Stalin unwelcome news. In 1942 there would be no "second front" in Europe to ease the pressure on Soviet forces. So worried about this first meeting was Churchill that he asked President Roosevelt if he could bring along [Averell Harriman](#) as the President's representative, to join the meetings and dinners, projecting a unified position.

That first meeting, although not a dinner, was not pleasant, and lasted from 7 pm to 11 pm. Churchill returned to the dacha exhausted. After meeting all the next day, Stalin gave an official closing banquet. Though Churchill was seated at Stalin's right, it did not make up for the "25 toasts and the filthy food."¹⁶ Nor did it make up for the abuse Churchill felt was being heaped on him and his staff over the second front. To make his pique clear, he attended this momentous event wearing his siren suit instead of the formal black tie more appropriate to such occasions.

A sudden thaw

Churchill was prepared to leave Moscow in high dudgeon, which was bad news for the Soviet dictator. Stalin knew that sooner or later he would need a second front to take pressure off his armies. Knowing his dacha was bugged, Churchill did nothing to hide his discontent from his conversations.

Magically, a message arrived asking Churchill to join Stalin for drinks and dinner at his private apartments. Since the previous banquet had been ceremonial, no substantive discussions were possible, so this was in fact Churchill's first private dinner with Stalin.

They served themselves from a sumptuous buffet. Only their interpreters and Foreign Minister [Vyacheslav Molotov](#) were present, although Stalin's daughter [Svetlana](#) made a cameo appearance. The atmosphere now was cordial and understanding. Churchill was delighted. He and Stalin "parted on most cordial and friendly terms," he told his Cabinet. To Roosevelt he wrote that they had "an agreeable conversation.... I am definitely encouraged by my visit to Moscow."¹⁷

It seems reasonable to conclude that Churchill's first-dinners score was four wins—Cockran, Clemmie, FDR, Stalin—and one loss, Theodore Roosevelt. They represent vital victories, and one inconsequential loss.

The author

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Endnotes

¹ Anne Sebba, *Jennie Churchill: Winston's American Mother* (London: John Murray, 2007), 207 and passim.

² Winston S. Churchill, Fulton, Missouri, 5 March 1946, in *The Sinews of Peace* (London: Cassell, 1948), 97-98.

³ WSC to Lady Randolph Churchill, 6 December 1895, in Randolph S. Churchill, ed., *The Churchill Documents*, vol. 1, *Youth 1874-1896* (Hillsdale, Mich.: Hillsdale College Press, 2006), 603.

⁴ Michael McMenamin & Curt Zoller, *Becoming Winston Churchill: The Untold Story of Young Winston and His American Mentor* (New York: Enigma Books, 2007) and *Finest Hour* 115, Summer 2002, passim.

⁵ Elting E. Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. 2., *The Years of Preparation 1896-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 1454.

⁶ Lawrence J. Siskind, "[When Teddy Roosevelt Had Winston Churchill to Dinner](#)," *Finest Hour Extras*, 25 January 2022, accessed 1 March 2022.

⁷ Roosevelt's letter of thanks is in Richard M. Langworth, "[Churchill and the Presidents: Theodore Roosevelt](#)," Hillsdale College Churchill Project, 2015, accessed 1 April 2022.

⁸ David Stafford, *Roosevelt and Churchill: Men of Secrets* (London: LittleBrown, 1999), xvi.

⁹ Mary Soames, *Clementine Churchill* (London: Cassell, 1979), 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28-29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵ John Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries 1939-1955* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 404.

¹⁶ Cita Stelzer, *Dinner with Churchill* (London: Short Books, 2011), 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.