

Russell McGregor

DEVOTEES OF EMPIRE

Graham Freudenberg, *Churchill and Australia*, Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2008. ISBN 9781405038706. RRP: \$55 hardcover. pp.613 + viii.

A slightly dishevelled Winston Churchill, hands on hips, solar topee on head, cigar stuck in his mouth, adorns the cover of this book. The pose suggests Churchill's legendary belligerence, but in this image his eyes are closed. Perhaps that was a reaction to the searing light – the photograph was taken during Churchill's visit to the headquarters of the Australian 9th Division in Egypt in 1942. Yet the combination of belligerent body-language and selective blindness epitomises the Churchill depicted in this book.

Churchill frequently expressed great admiration for the Australian people. Yet his actions as a political leader show that he had little understanding of, and still less empathy with, Australian outlooks and interests. Devoted to the British Empire, he was willing to sacrifice almost anything to ensure the Empire's survival. Those episodes in Churchill's career where Australians were to be the sacrificial objects — the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 and the Pacific War of 1942–1945

— loom large in this book; and Freudenberg's recounting of them highlights Churchill's arrogance and determination to get his own way, if need be by deviousness and dissembling. This is not a complimentary portrait of the great statesman, although Freudenberg is too sensitive an historian to give a wholly negative, one-sided portrayal of his subject. Churchill's undoubted abilities as a leader, as well as the vital role he played in crushing the scourge of Nazism, are given due acknowledgement.

While Churchill was a devotee of empire, so too were Australians in the first half of the twentieth century, as Freudenberg makes abundantly clear. Yet the Empire looked very different from an Australian, as against a British, perspective. As Freudenberg puts it: "There was always this basic difference: when Australians thought about the Empire, they were trying to define a place for Australia within it; for Churchill, it was not so much the British Empire, but Britain's Empire" (4). Australians conceived the Empire as a shield against a hostile — especially Asian — world and as a bond of blood kinship that united white Britishers around the globe, discounting the fact that the majority of members of the Empire were neither white nor of British ancestry. When the shield turned out to be a mere facade, with the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, and the bonds of kinship were reduced to little more than connections of convenience with

Churchill's attempts to redirect the Australian 7th Division from the defence of Australia to the defence of Burma later that year, Australians were understandably distressed. Even then, however, they were not alienated from the Empire.

Freudenberg shows how deeply committed to the Empire Australia remained during the Second World War, despite the Empire's inability to render material assistance in the Pacific theatre of that war. Prime Minister John Curtin made his celebrated "Australia looks to America" statement on 27 December 1941, but looking to America was then imagined as a mere short-term expedient in the emergency of war. Labor leaders like Curtin were no less devotees of Empire than their United Australia Party opponents. Churchill was affronted by Curtin's "looks to America" statement, but from Freudenberg's account it seems that Churchill was affronted by any attempt by Australia, or any other dominion, to step outside their subordinate role within the Empire. Churchill and Australia's leaders were as one on the need to maintain the Empire; their disagreements derived from differing perspectives on the Empire rather than differing assessments of its legitimacy or necessity.

Freudenberg devotes most of his pages to those times when Australia and Britain were together at war: the Boer War (where Churchill first had substantial interactions with an Australian, Banjo Paterson); the

First World War; and, most of all, the Second World War. The focus is understandable, since it was war, more than any other factor, that pushed Churchill and Australia's leaders into mutual engagement, although it does give the book a strong flavour of military history. Churchill's activities in the interwar years are ably, if briefly, recounted, but Freudenberg's account of the post-Second-World-War years is too cursory. Only one of thirty-two chapters deals with the two decades between the end of the war and Churchill's death in 1965, yet it was in those decades that the empire esteemed by Churchill fell apart, Australia moved from a British into an American orbit, international relations were reconfigured by the Cold War and the United Nations, and the demographic makeup of Australia moved slowly but steadily away from Britishness. Freudenberg glances at these developments but, coming after his meticulously detailed recounting of war-time dramas, the effect is anti-climactic.

Apart from the over-hasty final chapter, Freudenberg's narrative is both engaging and insightful. Though crammed with the minutiae of intra- and inter-governmental and military communications, it moves at a sprightly pace, enlivened by Freudenberg's eye for the revealing anecdote and the exemplary incident. It helps, too, that Freudenberg himself has had a long political career, as speech-writer for two Australian prime ministers (Whitlam and Hawke) and three New South Wales

premiers (Wran, Unsworth and Carr). All, of course, were Labor leaders, and Freudenberg makes no secret of his Labor sympathies and especially his admiration for Prime Minister Curtin during the war years. Nonetheless, he is generally even-handed in his judgements of political figures of whatever party allegiance. The only exceptions are the Labor “rats,” in particular the foremost “rat” of all, Billy Hughes. Even at this distance in time, it seems that the party faithful cannot remain neutral on — let alone forgive — Hughes for splitting the Labor Party in 1916.

Freudenberg characterises himself as a member of “the last Australian generation that, in adolescence, took being British for granted” (vii). Perhaps it is partly this generational perspective that allows him some measure of appreciation of the ambivalences in Churchill’s attitudes toward Australia. Though critical of Churchill’s imperious and high-handed manner in his dealings with Australian leaders, Freudenberg concludes that Churchill genuinely believed that he had “a solemn responsibility to the Australian people” (537). It was a patrician sense of responsibility, suffused with the assumption that his British Empire vision trumped the parochial and self-interested outlook of Australia. It is a sense of responsibility not readily appreciated in Australia today. Yet it is a measure of Freudenberg’s literary skill that he able to convey

something of that old-fashioned sense of duty in Churchill’s character alongside his arrogance, deviousness, and petulance.



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THE SECRET LIVES OF THEM

Christos Tsiolkas. *The Slap*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008. ISBN: 978 1 74175 359 2. 488 RRP: \$32.95 pp.488 Paperback.

The Slap, Christos Tsiolkas’s fourth novel, is clearly at odds with the offbeat rebellious voice, the narrative stamina, the hyperactiveness of his previous flamboyant characters and the confronting subject matters standing for the hallmark of his fiction. However, as most obsessions die hard, *The Slap* is yet again an indictment of contemporary society delving into the secret lives of sex-obsessed characters looking for cop-outs in a drug-infested Australian culture. Plotwise, the content and structure of *The Slap* smacks of soap opera culture which informs the narrative from cover to cover. The expository first chapter sets the scene for a family and friends get-together in a suburban Melbournian