

Roots in Ripon

Chuck Roots

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Darkest Hour

Movie reviews are not part of my usual literary trappings, but occasionally I watch a movie that really grabs my attention. As a rule, my wife and I rarely watch movies, either at home or in the theater.

Since we had made no particular plans for New Years Eve, we decided after church to enjoy a restful afternoon at home. I had already purchased tickets for the 6:20pm showing of the acclaimed *Darkest Hour* movie about Winston Churchill's rise to power as England's prime minister at a most critical juncture in what would become known as World War Two.

I hardly consider myself a connoisseur of the art of filmmaking, but I love history and *Darkest Hour* gives us a window into a one-month span in the embattled times of England as it stood on the brink of catastrophe. Their army of some 300,000 men was facing annihilation by the German Army of the Third Reich. Pinned down on the beaches of Dunkirk, France with their backs to the English Channel, their situation appeared hopeless. Germany ruled the sea and the air, as well as the ground. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (1937-40) had previously met with Der Führer, Adolf Hitler, returning home to England to proclaim peace agreements had been reached with Hitler. It turned out to be a hollow promise on the part of Hitler, placing Chamberlain in a most unfortunate position, and an embarrassing one, to boot.

The British Parliament was divided over how to proceed with a robust and voracious German military power that was running rough-shod over all of continental Europe. Chamberlain lost the confidence of the ruling parties, and was forced to step down. The only person who was acceptable to both political parties was Sir Winston Churchill, a curmudgeonly character if ever there was one. He was ill-mannered most of the time, impatient to the extreme, rude and demanding. Of all the witticisms attributed to Churchill, the one best known was in 1946 when he was attending a dinner party where Bessie Braddock, the rather plump leader of the Labour Party of Britain at the time, said to Churchill, "Winston, you are drunk." "Madam," he said, "you are ugly, and I will be sober in the morning."

But in May of 1940 the British were facing insurmountable odds. Parliament was preparing to enter into peace negotiations, effectually surrendering to the Germans. Winston Churchill would have none of that. The king of England at that time was King George the VI, who initially wanted nothing to do with Churchill and

was opposed to him becoming the prime minister. But as he saw Churchill's grit and determination, the King pledged his support, and as they say, the rest is history.

Throughout the movie there are numerous bits of delightful humor that had Isaura and me laughing out loud at times. It balanced the serious nature of the movie's storyline perfectly.

One of the bits of history I had never known before was how Neville Chamberlain became instrumental in changing Parliament's decision to reject the terms of peace, and, instead to fight Germany at all costs. Unfortunately, Chamberlain will be forever stuck with the "peace in our time" assurance, but at crunch-time he did support the unpopular Churchill who was determined to fight Germany.

One of the great acts of history was the manner in which the British people saved their army. The military leaders were paralyzed in taking any action in rescuing their stranded army, only eighty miles across the English Channel. Churchill asked the English people to take their personal water craft and sail to Dunkirk (Dunkerque in French). Thousands of boats came across the water, rescuing nearly all 300,000 British troops. Some boats were so small that they could only carry a few troops per crossing.

Winston Churchill is the sort of person you need in a moment of crisis. He was a master in knowing how to invigorate and challenge the British people to courageously stand against the military might of Germany. This, at a time when every other European country was either remaining neutral or had already been conquered by the well-equipped and well-trained German army.

I know very little about actors these days, but I will say that Gary Oldman, who played Winston Churchill, was absolutely amazing. The rest of the supporting cast was equally well placed. Isaura turned to me at one point in the movie and said, "I think that's an actual film of Churchill." It wasn't, but the filming was so well done that it made you feel as though it was.

Another poignant part in the film was the phone conversations Churchill had with American President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Churchill implored FDR to come to England's rescue, to no avail. In fact, the United States did not enter the war until Sunday, December 7, 1941 when Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese. The next day, Monday, December 8, Germany declared war on the United States. Nearly two years had passed since Britain's darkest hour.

Grit and determination are characteristic of the Brits. This movie portrays this in spades. And Winston Churchill was the King of Spades when it came to grit and just plain cussedness.

Go see the movie, Darkest Hour. You'll be glad you did.

Happy New Year!