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All Behind You, Winston: Churchill's Great Coalition 1940-45

Roger Hermiston

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On 14 May 1940, the Evening Standard published a cartoon with the caption ‘All Behind You, Winston’. It showed Churchill, the freshly installed prime minister, rolling up his sleeves to confront the oncoming menace of Nazi Germany. In his wake, leading the endless ranks of the British people, marched the most prominent figures of his new coalition government.

It was a potent expression of a moment when Britons of every class were truly all in it together. It also contained a truth that Churchill’s titanic historical reputation has since eclipsed: that neither he nor the country would have prevailed but for the joint effort of this remarkable ‘ministry of all the talents’. Indeed, without the vital support of the Labour Party, and its leader Clement Attlee, Churchill might never have become prime minister at all.

Now Roger Hermiston tells the story of the men – and women – who steered Britain through its darkest hour, showing how they helped to win the Second World War, and how they laid the foundations of the ‘New Jerusalem’ that followed. Along the way, he explores the roles played by characters as diverse as the mercurial newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook, who supplied the planes that won the Battle of Britain; the pugnacious trade union baron Ernest Bevin, who kept the nation working; Lord Woolton, the minister for food – a man so widely loved he was dubbed ‘Uncle Fred’; and Sir John Anderson, one of the first people to contemplate the awful power of the atom bomb. Hermiston also considers the achievements of more junior ministers, including the only two women in Churchill’s government: the left-wing firebrand Ellen Wilkinson, and the Conservative Florence Horsbrugh, who played a pivotal role alleviating the suffering inflicted by the Blitz.

Five years after that cartoon, Churchill predicted that history would shine a light on ‘every helmet’ of his ‘great coalition’. As it was, many were forgotten. This book seeks to recover their memory, and to celebrate a generation of politicians who rose above party to put their country first.

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