



## Clementine: The Life of Mrs. Winston Churchill

*Sonia Purnell*

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**Clementine: The Life of Mrs. Winston Churchill** Sonia Purnell

**A long-overdue tribute to the extraordinary woman behind Winston Churchill**

By Winston Churchill's own admission, victory in the Second World War would have been "impossible without her." Until now, however, the only existing biography of Churchill's wife, Clementine, was written by her daughter. Sonia Purnell finally gives Clementine her due with a deeply researched account that tells her life story, revealing how she was instrumental in softening FDR's initial dislike of her husband and paving the way for Britain's close relationship with America. It also provides a surprising account of her relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt and their differing approaches to the war effort.

Born into impecunious aristocracy, the young Clementine was the target of cruel snobbery. Many wondered why Winston married her, but their marriage proved to be an exceptional partnership. Beautiful and intelligent, but driven by her own insecurities, she made his career her mission. Any real consideration of Winston Churchill is incomplete without an understanding of their relationship, and Clementine is both the first real biography of this remarkable woman and a fascinating look inside their private world.

## Clementine: The Life of Mrs. Winston Churchill Details

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## From Reader Review Clementine: The Life of Mrs. Winston Churchill for online ebook

### Caroline says

Unlike her American counterpart Eleanor Roosevelt, Clementine Churchill has received relatively little recognition or approbation from history. Eleanor is heralded as one of the great women of the century in her own right; indeed, she lived such a separate life from her equally famous husband Franklin Roosevelt that her role as a wife is very much the least of the hats she wore. In contrast, whatever fame or recognition Clementine has earned over the years, her name is always coupled with that of Winston, never independently.

And that is probably the way Clementine would have wanted it, as Sonia Purnell portrays in this admirable biography. Winston Churchill was Clementine's first, second and third priorities, one of her daughters once commented, only half-humorously. And he was more than enough to take up anyone's attention! History has remembered Churchill as such a colossal figure that it is more than refreshing to take a peek behind the curtain, through these pages - to see the insecure, needy, often infantile and demanding man that he was in private. It only serves to humanise him and make him, if not always a more sympathetic figure, than a more understandable one.

Whilst this is Clementine's biography it would be impossible to tell her story apart from Winston's. He was her whole world. She was always convinced of Winston's destiny of greatness, perhaps even more than he was; and that he attained the highest peaks of political life, that he came back from political exile after the Dardanelles disaster and his wilderness years, that he sustained his own and the country's vigour and morale throughout the hard years of war, that he bore the weight of the European war on his shoulders before America's entry, can in no small measure be ascribed to the emotional comfort, support and more than occasional scolding he received from his wife.

Winston and Clementine Churchill epitomise the truth of the old adage - 'behind every great man is a great woman'. It is highly unlikely that Churchill could have achieved half of what he did without Clementine, and considering how history has remembered, that is high praise indeed. That she 'managed' Churchill in a way that even his political colleagues and subordinates recognised, at the same time as playing her own public role, visiting hospitals, shelters, canteens, raising funds for appeals, playing hostess for major political and military figures, and many more wartime activities that I only learned about for the first time reading this book - one can only be grateful for Britain had not one but two Churchill's during her darkest hour.

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### Denise Matthes says

Not bad, but the author is trying too hard to make Clementine the secret heroine of the Churchill story. She is overbalanced in making her case. The book is further marred, for me, by the usage of such language as schmoozing which jars one from the narrative. If the author was, indeed, privy to previously unread letters, the book does not gain by it. Closer editing would have prevented the reader from being constantly re-introduced to Churchill family members and friends. A disappointment.

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## **Brenda says**

So good, so good! The story was so much more than a biography of Clementine Churchill. Purnell captured the time periods, the challenges facing the world and Britain in particular. She examined the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Churchill and (I believe) showed it for all its beauty and difficulties. It was exceptional!

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## **Literary Chic says**

Barely had time to listen to the audiobook. I definitely don't have time for a quality review right now. However, the book was great! I'm always fascinated at hearing about "great" women's foibles. Maybe that's the deviant in me, but I like seeing the dichotomy of greatness and failure. It's nice to see that even the "greats" weren't the "perfects"...which is encouraging to me! Clementine was an excellent wife to Winston, but not a great mother. This was a great overdue biography!

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## **cameron says**

Excellent facts I never knew about her life. She was a cold and complicated character in many ways and Lived the life of the upper classes with great verve. She managed Mr. Churchill by letting him have his way and let him pursue his priorities as he wanted and he seems to have loved her for it. Slightly dryly written but well worth the time.  
I was sad to say that I didn't like her at all.

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## **Michael says**

Clementine Churchill lived an amazing life. She was incredibly under appreciated, both in her time, and now. I feel like I know a fair amount about Eleanor Roosevelt who was an incredible advocate. Clementine Churchill may well have done more for Britain (and the free world) than Eleanor, but has received almost no credit. Born into impoverished nobility, she was about a decade younger than Winston Churchill. This book draws heavily from the copious correspondence between Winston and Clementine. They were generally not model parents, and the book does not sugar coat their shortcomings in this area. Clementine was privy to most of what Winston dealt with (including state secrets). She advised and challenged Winston, and was often the only one who could challenge him. She tempered him in many ways, and often re-wrote speeches and memos. For a book where you know how it will end (there are no secrets about history), it was a gripping read. I even pushed it ahead of other books on my "to read" pile.

<http://michaelgolrick.blogspot.com/20...>

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## **Elizabeth says**

This biography is hands down the best biography I have ever read. I'm actually really sad to be finished! I love reading about women in history and Sonia Purnell made Clementine's life absolutely fascinating. I was

particularly struck by the picture of Winston and Clementine's marriage which was devoted, difficult and extremely complex. Many women would have either abandoned the kind of marriage she had or become total doormats but she did neither. Winston was clearly self-centered, demanding and often oblivious of her needs and desires. On the other hand, she was the only person he trusted to challenge him, point out his failures and champion him regardless of his flaws. I found it absolutely astounding that a woman in the early/mid 19th century was able to have such an impact simply because she was someone's wife. Both Clementine and Winston are depicted as imperfect, flawed people, neither glorified nor villified. I think one mark of a good biography is whether the reader can take away any lessons from the subject's life. I've taken away a good bit about how to both champion and challenge my husband, how to step out of my comfort zone to build him up and do what needs to be done in a crisis, and also that marriage and family and career need to be balanced (as the Churchills did not do.) Highly recommended.

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### **Eileen says**

Beguiled by Deborah Cohen's review in the Wall Street Journal, I could hardly wait to get my hands on Clementine! She did not exaggerate! Although Winston Churchill's pivotal role in modern history is widely recognized, little has been written about this intriguing woman and the vital part she played. Here one finds a finely drawn portrait, complete with failings as well as her numerous strengths. The mother of five children, Clementine was the first to admit that she came up short in that department. For instance, there was this astounding development after their first child was born: 'The minute she was allowed out of bed, she deserted her husband and newborn baby, fleeing to a cottage near Brighton for ten days with Nellie, her sister.'! Winston was her world, and he was definitely quirky, with a mighty ego requiring high maintenance – a challenge for any wife! Clementine's loyalty and devotion were significant, in fact absolutely essential to his functioning, one learns. And yet, "There was never any question of them being in the same bed, or the same room, or even in the same part of the house, recalls their niece Clarissa Churchill. They were nowhere near each other"! Beautiful, reserved, courageous, determined Clementine! The book provides an opportunity to watch the events of that tumultuous time unfold, as well as a window on the marriage between two strong-willed, fascinating people. There were also intriguing asides, as in, 'Emotions were heightened by the dangers of war and, as one writer put it, 'sex' in those early war years "hung in the air like a fog"! What a rich reading experience this was! I was loath to return the book to the library as I'd flagged so many bits to revisit!

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### **Dem says**

I purchased this one on audio and while the narrator is adequate I realised 30% into the audio that we would have to part company quickly as I was finding this one very boring listening and felt it was dragging and and knew I wasn't get the best from the book. I returned it to Audible (thank you audible) and hope to purchase a hard copy of this one in the future as I do believe it deserves a second chance and hopefully my reading experience of it will be more favourable next time.

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### **Kelly says**

Review included in a group review of my reading from fall/winter on my blog, just scroll down a bit:

<https://shouldacouldawouldabooks.com/...>

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## Jean says

Historians have mostly ignored Mrs. Churchill. The only biographer until now was her daughter Mary Soames. Purnell appears to have been fair minded and scrupulous in her biography. The book is well written and researched. There are lots of pictures to peruse.

Purnell portrayed Clementine as a strong willed and ambitious woman who was a great support to Winston Churchill. The author, as well as many other historians, made it clear in the book that Winston Churchill was a difficult man to live with. They both were products of unstable marriages. Clementine's mother was Lady Blanche Hosier and her husband was Colonel Henry Hosier but it is thought that Blanches, bother- in- law Lord Bertie Mitford was Clementine's father. Blanche's brother Lord Redesdale gave Clementine away at her wedding to Winston.

The author says that it appears both were faithful to their marriage for over 60 years. Clementine had a flirtation with a man on a cruise one time when their marriage was at a rocky point but she says nothing was acted upon. Purnell quotes Winston fondly described an enraged Clemmie as "a jaguar dropping out of a tree."

Their mutual goal was the office of Prime Minister. Clementine had a genius both at patching up the wreckage caused by Winston's bad decisions and at offering good advice. Clementine was a committed suffragist who unflinchingly put her husband first. Their intimate relationship was crucially tested during the "wilderness years." The Churchills thrived on the combination of crisis and chaos. Clementine volunteered for the job of rooftop fire watcher during WWII. She was respected for her humanitarian efforts on the home front and as a great First Lady during WWII.

If you enjoy reading about the Churchills this is a must read book. I read the hardback book the book is 392 pages long and was published in 2015.

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## Edith says

2 1/2 Stars. On the one hand, this biography opened up the world of the Churchills, and made Winston's resounding success as wartime Prime Minister even more remarkable, considering the enemy he faced and his own (and Clementine's) flaws. But they both had equally remarkable, if idiosyncratic, virtues which came perfectly into play at the nation's moment of crisis.

On the other hand, Ms. Purnell is not a particularly good writer, and has, in fact, a tin ear for language. A clunky stylist, she also misuses words like "remiss" and "diaphanous." More seriously, there are several errors of fact. (I defy you to figure out the relationship between Diana Churchill and Diana Mitford--she is variously described as Clementine's niece and as Diana C's 2nd cousin. [I think the latter is correct, unless you agree with Ms. Purnell that Clementine's biological father was Lord Redesdale!]) Ms. Purnell seems somewhat careless in small matters, which always makes me feel uneasy about the large ones.

No one who reads the chapter "A Country Basket" can emerge with their respect for the Churchills intact; they were shockingly poor parents, even in an age where aristocratic parents were distant from their children. No one who reads how Mrs. Churchill more or less "pimped out" her daughter and daughter-in-law can be edified by her behavior, even for the sake of the goals she had in doing so.

Recommended for its broad scale portrait of two immensely important personalities, neither of whom were

particularly likable individuals in their personal lives--if you can tolerate a certain amount of infelicitous writing.

(By the way, though biographies of Clementine Churchill are not numerous, her daughter's biography is not the only one. There is a biography by Jack Fishman. Its main virtue may be the very interesting introduction by Eleanor Roosevelt, who often met Mrs. Churchill.)

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## happy says

Ms Purnell has written a fascinating look at the wife of probably the 20th Century's greatest citizen of Great Britain and maybe it's greatest prime minister. The author had the advantage of thousands of letters and notes passed between them over the course of their lives and it allowed her to paint a very complete picture of both their personal and public relationship. To say Winston was a difficult man to live with is an understatement. Yet in over 60 yrs of marriage, there was very little hint of scandal or other people intruding into their marriage. It seems that unlike their parents they remained faithful to each other for the length of their lives together.

In telling of Clementine's youth, the author brings up the financial difficulties that followed her mother. It got to the point the Clementine actually worked as a seamstress to help the family finances. This lack of financial resources seems to have affected Clementine's attitude towards money throughout her marriage. Neither she nor Winston were wealthy and the author brings out that money problems were always lurking until very late in their lives. It seems that while Clementine was always worried about making ends meet, Winston spent money like he actually had it. Ms Purnell makes a point of saying that the only time in their marriage Winston deceived her is when he bought their estate at Chartwell without her knowledge.

In looking at Winston's political career, both for very ambitious for him. They both had the the goal of his eventually gaining the Prime Ministership. It seems Clementine had a better sense of local politics and often saved Winston from himself. When that was not possible, she was instrumental at resurrecting his fortunes. One of the examples the author sites is his rejoining the Army in 1916 after his being dismissed from the government after Gallipoli. That said, he didn't always follow her advice. Continuing the WW I example, he went to France and actually commanded a bn on the Western Front. She thought he should stay in France longer than he did and wait to be called home. After about 9 mths he was tired of France and ready to rejoin the Government, where he wasn't wanted. As a sitting MP, he was allowed to come home but wasn't as readily accepted as he thought he should be. It took some months before he rejoined the government as Minister of Production.

Despite her being intimately involved in his political career, they really didn't agree on politics. One example the author cites is woman's suffrage. She was a suffragette from an early age, but he was adamantly opposed until forced to accept the reality. When Labor overtook the Liberal Party as Britain's second major party and Winston returned to the Tory's, their political views rarely agreed after that. That didn't stop her from working on his behalf and she was a major factor in keeping him in office.

About half the narrative concerns World War II. One aspect that I found interesting was how Winston used her as a confidant and an advisor. This is contrasted to FDR and Eleanor's relationship. According to the author, FDR told his wife almost nothing about the war and she really had no input on decisions concerning major strategic matters. FDR is quoted as saying the he didn't tell Eleanor anything because it would be in her newspaper column the next day. Clementine on the other was in attendance at major decision making conferences and Winston would bounce his thoughts off of her constantly. It was said by many of his senior officials and generals that she was the only one how could reign in many of his wilder ideas and keep him

somewhat grounded in reality. An example of his trust in her is that she knew of Overlord almost from the first planning stages. This is contrasted with FDR who told his wife the night before the D-Day landings.

In addition to their public life's successes and failures being well illustrated, their private lives are also explored. This includes their problems with their children. Their son disappointed them with his behavior and caused them many major embarrassments. When his marriage broke down, they remained extremely close to their daughter-in-law, Pamela. So close that they used her as an informal intelligence agent. It seems she slept through most of the American high command and diplomatic staff and gleaned valuable information on US attitudes and intentions from her exploits. To say their son wasn't happy in an understatement. Two of their three daughters also had major problems throughout their lives and also caused them some embarrassment.

Their living arrangements were also not typical. They both had their own rooms and interests and except at meal times were rarely in the same room at the same time. Also, they often took separate vacations. Ms Purnell says Clementine needed the time apart to recuperate and regain her strength. The author calculated that perhaps they spent only 20% of their married lives in each other's company.

All in all this is an excellent look at one of histories greatly undervalued and under known figures. Winston Churchill definitely wouldn't have achieved his greatness without her. This is a solid 4 star read and I highly recommend this.

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## Carol says

First: her name rhymes with **mean**, not mine. And while we're talking about words one reads but never pronounces, the audio preview taught me that *brougham* sounds like broom!

Purnell does a superb job explaining the complexity that is Clementine. Many people believe that Winston Churchill saved Western Civilization ... and that Clementine kept Winston sane. Both WSC and CC came from wretchedly neglectful parents. Sadly, they had serious shortcomings in their own parenting.

A few strands of my swirling thoughts:

:: She was unflinchingly respectful of the man she married. He was quirky and self-absorbed by any standard. But she held fast to her belief that he was a great man, and she never belittled him, it seems, in public or in private. On their first anniversary he wrote, *I feel so safe with you & I do not keep the slightest disguise*. This doesn't mean she acquiesced to whatever he said; she edited his speeches, challenged his thinking, and was hard on him, if need be.

:: Her (their) hospitality was the backbone of their anti-Hitler efforts. There was a constant flow of people into their home and at their table. *Flawless hospitality became part of Winton's surprisingly inclusive political style, based on the principle that good food, wine and Clementine's charm made almost anything possible*.

:: Her beauty and fashion sense were iconic. The author compares her to Jackie Onassis in her influence. Many war photos show her with a turban in her hair, a hat tip {grin} to the women working in the factories.

:: She loved a good boisterous cackle. My favorite photograph in the book is with her mouth wide open laughing.

:: She had seasons of unfathomable grief. Family deaths bunched together. And the loss, of which she never spoke, of her daughter Marigold "Duckadilly" before she was three. She was prone to depression.

:: She had Winston's complete trust and was privy to a majority of top-secret information during the war.

With Winston there was no such thing as moderation. She poured herself out, helping him, until she was empty. Then she went off for a get-away by herself for an extended time. Again and again. I think the hardest thing for me to reconcile were her many long absences when the children were very young.

The last sentence of this book was pitch perfect. A supremely satisfying end of a fascinating book.

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### **Theresa says**

Winston Churchill's accomplishments are well known - and the post World War II world would have looked quite different without him. This is the story of his wife, Clementine (rhymes with "mean", not "mine"), who stood by her great husband's side for over 50 years. Churchill claimed marrying "Clemmie" had been his most brilliant achievement (p. 390). Sonia Purnell does a great job bringing Clementine to life - a life that is well worth reading about!

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### **Carol Glassman says**

Really enjoyed this book as it was a great history of Britain as well as an intimate look at both Churchills, their family and friends as well as some of the great leaders of their day - Roosevelt, Stalin, Clement Atlee, Averell Harriman -- it certainly knocked these people off their pedestals and gave us a look at all the skeletons in their closets.

Rather than pick on details, I tended to look at the broad picture and thoroughly enjoyed this well-written biography which was well written and gripping in many ways. To be that gripped by a book when the ending is already well known says a lot for the writing. I found myself rooting for Clementine and occasionally wishing someone would have given Winston a good boot in the butt for not appreciating all she did for him, risking her health and subverting her own interesting personality to cater to his needs.

Most people idolized Churchill and his accomplishments, and indeed, I wonder if any other politician could have saved the world from Hitler. However, this book makes it very clear that without his 'Clemmie' behind him, Winston most likely would never have succeeded. Not terribly maternal with her children, Clementine nevertheless put up with her gigantic child-like, spoiled and demanding husband, catering to his every whim and studying not only the politics but the personalities behind them in order to guide him in making intelligent decisions. Unknown to most, she became the iron hand in the velvet glove and eventually won the admiration and respect of many world leaders. She did not have an easy life, constantly fearing they could not afford his extravagant demands and habits and often living hand-to-mouth on the charity of friends. Although we all know the outcome of the war, few of us might know the great part Winston Churchill's wife Clementine played in it.

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### **LeeAnn Heringer says**

There's a point where you're reading a biography that you don't like and can't figure out whether it's the author or the subject that is annoying you. The author kept telling me Mrs Churchill was a fabulous witty character, but then never gave me an example of her wit. Most of the direct quotes are from letters between her and her husband where she's nagging him about something. Mrs Churchill comes across as angry and brittle. The type of woman who gets annoyed at her husband so spends an extra month on ski holiday in the Alps to spite him. She comes across as unpleasant without being really interesting. But maybe it's just the author...

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### Chris Ginkens says

The main reason for the 4 is that the author took the time to write about Mrs. Churchill. I was amazed that very little has been written about her and the great contribution she made during WWII. Many times throughout the book you're given examples of how Winston was Winston, because of Clementine. I enjoyed getting to know her warts and all.

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### Chrissie says

Wow, I really AM impressed. This is VERY good. It starts out good and amazingly enough gets better and better. It is about time somebody turned their focus on Winston Churchill's wife, a person behind the scenes who did so much.

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On completion:

I liked this book because it so well portrays the complicated relationships between the members of the Churchill family – Winston and his wife Clementine and their five children. I thought about the love between Winston and Clementine. One sees both the love and also the hurt they caused each other. I thought about the parents' respective relationships with the children. No two relationships were the same and this gives food for thought. Did Clementine learn from her earlier mistakes in child-raising? Could Clementine ever relate to her children as Winston did? How did the children relate to their parents, and why did each one behave so differently? There is deep suffering within this family but for different reasons and with different outcomes. The personal interactions are well explored. I didn't see any of them drawn in a superficially favorable light.

The events of the First and Second World War are drawn from a British point of view, in a concise and clear manner only referring to those events directly related to the Churchills. The Dardanelles disaster, Winston's "wilderness years" of the 30s and the efforts of him and his wife in drawing America into the Second World War are told from a perspective I have not read before. Hearing of Clementine's views and behind-the-scenes involvement is eye-opening. I appreciated the explanation of why even after victory at the end of the Second World War Churchill failed to be reelected. Generally a victor is honored! How Churchill reacted and how Clementine reacted to losing the election in 1945 and what they felt and did is interesting to observe. I found it revealing to compare the respective couples - the Roosevelts and the Churchills. Clementine was so very different from Eleanor, yet both helped, guided and opposed their respective husband in their own way. One views markedly different personalities and different cultures. The close look at Clementine's importance to Winston and her role in his career has not been covered with such depth in the other books I have read as it is here.

The audiobook is well narrated by Charlotte Strevens. The pronunciation is British rather than American and it should be so. It took me a while to accustom myself to this. Once I got the hang of it I had no trouble understanding. The speed was good.

I really cannot say I have any complaints with the book. I thought first I should give it five stars because of this very fact. Instead I am going by my gut reaction; I REALLY like the book so I am giving it four stars. For me a five star book has to have something that makes it shine exceptionally, an element of superb imagination. The book is a very good analysis of the complex relationships found within the Churchill family and a clear review of the individuals' lives. There are zillions of books on Winston Churchill and his role in the wars but this book fills a gap not covered before!

Other books on the Churchills:

The Private Lives of Winston Churchill (3 stars)

Hero of the Empire: The Boer War, a Daring Escape, and the Making of Winston Churchill (4 stars)

A Daughter's Tale: The Memoir of Winston and Clementine Churchill's Youngest Child (3 stars)

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## Margo says

An intimate biography of a powerful woman, a woman behind a "throne" of one of the most powerful, influential men of our times. I have to confess that I do not like biographies. For me they are dull and too full of put-you-to-sleep details. I read this book for a book club and though I did like it I allowed myself to be distracted by my interesting fictional books.

There is a lot of detail and some of it is a little heavy handed but for the most part Ms. Purnell manages to eliminate the non-essential and focus on personalities and events in a way that enlightens rather than dulls reading. There is a fair amount of information about what Winston was doing at any particular time, but that is necessary to cast light on what Clementine was reacting to. Through this book I came to admire a woman who has had little written about her. I must be picky about two assessments in the book - Ms. Purnell's assessment on snobbish put downs of Churchill's depression (he called it his black dog, and her equally snobby assessment of Clementine's health calling it hypochondria. I almost had to laugh at both these comments. Ms. Purnell is neither a doctor or medical person nor has she seemed to know much about depression. She seems to think that just because Winston could successfully work he did not have depression.

The most interesting sections for me were her meeting Eleanor Roosevelt and the author's comparison to the two women. Second the narration of Clementine's efforts during WWII to make sure citizen needs for medical supplies and the like were met. Third was the details on her family and the lack-a-lusher children she had.

This is a very good book for people who like biographies and a decent book for those who do not.

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