



The Splendid and the Vile, by Erik Larson
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, May 2020

Nonfiction writer Erik Larson has few equals when it comes to bringing historical events vividly to life. His perennial favorites, including *The Devil in the White City*, remain atop bestseller lists long after their initial publications. *The Splendid and the Vile*, his new book, focuses on Sir Winston Churchill's first pivotal year as Britain's Prime Minister at the start of World War II.

Aptly subtitled *A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz*, Larson's page-turner is panoramic in scope, yet intimate in detail. The author's prodigious research includes intelligence reports and journals of Churchill's "Secret Circle" ministers and confidants. Diary entries of Churchill's teenage daughter Mary offer glimpses of their family life at 10 Downing Street and at Chequers, the official prime ministerial estate northwest of London.

In May 1940, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain resigned six months after Britain had declared war on Germany, Churchill was asked to form a government. Chamberlain was regarded as "staid and deliberate," while Churchill was considered "flamboyant, electric, and wholly unpredictable." Churchill, however, "brought a naked confidence that under his leadership Britain would win the war, even though any objective appraisal would have said he did not have a chance."

Soon after Churchill's installation, Nazi Germany began its "Battle for Britain." Under the direction of Hermann Goring, the brutal chief of the German air force, the Luftwaffe, the Third Reich waged a relentless bombing campaign. One London evening, at the height of the Blitz, John Colville, Churchill's private secretary, heard "the sound of German bombers" and noted "the night was cloudless and starry, with the moon over Westminster. It was magnificent and terrible, the spasmodic drone of enemy overhead, the thunder of gunfire, the illumination and the myriad of stars. Never was there such a contrast of natural splendor and human vileness."

Churchill fully understood that America's industrial might and manpower were needed to stave off Hitler. His artful diplomacy with President Franklin D. Roosevelt led to the passage of the USA's Lend-Lease Act. Particularly fascinating are Churchill's interactions with FDR's trusted advisor Harry Hopkins and the urbane diplomat Averill Harriman.

Larson deftly contrasts Churchill's brinkmanship with the Third Reich's growing dysfunction. When Deputy Fuhrer Rudolf Hess crashed his plane in Scotland during an aborted peace-plan mission in May 1941, the Nazis view it as a propaganda disaster. Goring himself berated the airfield officer for letting Hess fly. "How am I supposed to know," the officer sardonically retorted, "that a lunatic can hold such a high office in the Third Reich?"

Throughout *The Splendid and the Vile*, Winston Churchill, the man of the moment, looms large. The British people, however, with their steadfast determination and ability "to carry on" during the Blitz are the quiet heroes of Larson's fine book. Their courage and hope, indeed, are object lessons for our current calamitous times.