

The Nomination that Gave Churchill the Nobel Prize.

I have in my home in Sweden a typewritten copy of the letter nominating Winston S. Churchill for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1953. The letter is signed Birger Nerman, and my copy has a handwritten dedication to Gerda Serrander, my great-grandmother. I assume that, as nowadays, the nominators were asked to keep their nominations secret, but that after the prize had been awarded, Nerman could not resist giving copies of his nomination to some of his close friends.

Moreover, Nerman also sent a copy to Churchill. I spent the autumn 2016 as a visiting Fellow at Churchill College in Cambridge, and I took the opportunity to contact the director of the Churchill Archives Centre which is located in the college and inquire about Churchill's Nobel Prize. He found in the Archives a letter from Nerman to Churchill dated 19 December 1953 (a week after the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony on 10 December), where Nerman explains that he has had "for some years the honour of suggesting your name for the Nobel Prize in Literature", and that several persons, including Churchill's Swedish publisher Captain Bertil Sterner, had encouraged Nerman to send the nomination to Churchill; Nerman enclosed a copy of the nomination letter together with an English translation of it. Churchill's private secretary Anthony Montague Browne forwarded the letter to Churchill together with a draft of a reply, which Churchill signed on 25 December, thanking Nerman for the copy of "your letter to the Nobel Committee in which you express yourself in such flattering terms".

The nomination letter is three pages long and begins by saying that Nerman has had the honour of nominating Churchill since 1948, and then he repeats his previous nomination. Nerman praises Churchill's vast production, commenting in some detail on his early works *The Malakand Field Force* and *The River War* ("extend far beyond the range of mere war stories"), his great biography of his ancestor Marlborough ("universally acclaimed as a masterpiece"), his *Great Contemporaries* ("as psychologically pertinent as they are chivalrous"), and his history of the First World War ("the most distinguished account of that war ever written"), and also on Churchill's political speeches before and during the Second World War ("expressive of the eternal heroism of the human spirit"). There are also added enthusiastic comments on *The Second World War*, of which five volumes had appeared since Nerman's first nomination ("there is not a single work in the entire world of literature in which a writer with so supreme a mastery of language has described a course of events of such a significance").

Nerman concludes that Churchill's writings have exhibited "those high, inalienable human virtues of courage, chivalry and truth". Nerman also writes: "The fact that Churchill in action has played a greater part than any other person of our times in rescuing humanity from the barbarism of the dictatorships and in preserving the Western world's system of law and justice should not, of course, in any way detract from his purely literary merits." Thus Nerman succeeds both to remind the reader of Churchill's enormous political importance, and to deny that this is a factor for the Nobel Prize.

Who was the nominator Birger Nerman? He was a well-known Swedish archaeologist, born in 1888. He had been professor in Archaeology in Dorpat (Estonia) 1923-1925, and he was Director of The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm since 1938. He was a member of the Swedish Academy of Letters (an academy for the Humanities), and was therefore invited to submit nominations for the Nobel Prize in literature, which is awarded by the Swedish Academy (an academy for Swedish language and literature). Birger Nerman died in 1971.

Birger Nerman had two brothers that were also well-known. His twin brother Einar (1888-1983) was a famous artist. His older brother Ture (1886-1969) was a politician and journalist and may possibly have influenced Birger's nomination; Ture Nerman was before and during the Second

World War one of the leading anti-Nazi politicians in Sweden. Ture had been one of the founders of the Swedish Communist Party in 1917, and he was Member of the Swedish Parliament for the communists in 1931-1937, but in 1939 he left the Communist Party and returned to the Social Democratic Party. During the Second World War, when Sweden was neutral but surrounded by countries occupied by or in alliance with Germany, Ture Nerman published the fiercely anti-Nazi weekly newspaper *Trots Allt*. The government tried (successfully) to keep Sweden out of the war and did not want to irritate Germany, and therefore tried to stop Ture Nerman in various ways, including a jail sentence in 1940 for "endangering Sweden's relations with Germany" with his editorial *Hitler's hellish machine*. After the war, Ture Nerman was back in Parliament 1946-1953, now as a Social Democrat and now very positive to the Western powers.

Nominations to the Nobel Prizes are kept secret for 50 years, but the Nobel Prize web site now contains a database of older nominations with names of nominators and nominees. The database shows that there were 34 nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1953, for 25 different persons, and that Birger Nerman was the only person who nominated Churchill this year, so it was really his nomination that gave the prize to Churchill. Among the 24 other nominees, that thus were deemed less worthy than Churchill by the Swedish Academy, were Ernest Hemingway (who got the prize the year after). The database also shows that Churchill had been nominated already in 1946, by Axel Romdahl (1880-1951), a Swedish professor of Art History and museum curator in Gothenburg, and that in 1948-1952 several others in addition to Birger Nerman had nominated Churchill. (Churchill had also been nominated to the Nobel Peace Prize in 1945 and 1950, but as we know, he did not get it.)

Epilogue

The digitized archives of the Swedish newspapers Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet show that the Swedish Academy made their decision on Thursday 15 October 1953. However, the news had leaked and already the day before (14 October), the newspapers reported that according to Reuters, Churchill would get the prize; this was also reported in the British newspapers the same day. After the official announcement, Churchill was honoured and grateful and hoped to come to Stockholm receive the award, and Gustaf VI, the King of Sweden, invited him to stay at the Royal Palace. However, at the end, Churchill's duties as Prime Minister prevailed and he went to a summit in Bermuda, while his wife Lady Churchill went to Stockholm and accepted the Nobel Prize on his behalf.

The comments on the Nobel Prize in these Swedish newspapers were, with few exceptions, very positive. The Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy stressed that the prize was a literary award, and that one reason for not giving it to Churchill earlier was that it then might have been seen as a political award.

The official motivation for Churchill's Nobel Prize is "*for his mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values*".

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