



Nemon in his studio with his clay statue of Sir Winston Churchill which was about to be cast in bronze for the Guildhall, London, in 1955

Churchill

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IT SEEMS ALMOST too good to be true that Nemon and the Churchill family plus entourage came to stay at the same luxury hotel in Morocco at exactly the same time . . . with such important consequences for Nemon's career. There was an element of coincidence. There were also cunning plans . . . but whose plans? And how many of them worked?

Nemon's version of why and how he went to Marrakesh is not a matter of dispute. A friend of his, the French psychoanalyst René Laforgue, invited him to stay in Casablanca to avoid the worst of the British winter and its harmful effects on his health (he was seldom free from headaches). For their Christmas holiday at the end of 1950 Laforgue and his wife had planned to move to the Mamounia Hotel in Marrakesh, then as now a very smart establishment. But for anyone else there was no room at the inn. The Churchill party had booked all available rooms (paid for by *Life*, the American publisher of Churchill's Second World War memoirs) to give the Great Man, then Leader of the Conservative Opposition, the time and space to finish the fifth volume in peace and quiet. The coincidence of Churchill's booking in at the same hotel, however, made Laforgue even keener to press his invitation, sensing an unmissable opportunity for his friend. But Nemon hesitated. Even if he could somehow sneak into the hotel he felt that Churchill, whom he had hero-worshipped from afar for many years, would not take to the idea of sitting for his portrait when he was intent on resting and relaxing and – although my father Nemon didn't know this – writing his memoirs. Nemon said in his own memoir that Churchill 'would certainly not relish being hounded by a sculptor'. But in the end my father decided to accept his friend's invitation.

There is more than one account, however, of the circumstances that led to the portentous first meeting between Nemon and the well-guarded and then reclusive Mr Churchill. Nemon's own goes as follows:

I went down to the restaurant for a meal and found that Laforgue had managed to reserve a table not far from the Churchills . . . I would be embarrassed to [make sketches] in public . . . but I would make some mental notes . . . After lunch, when I was alone in my room, I started making a sculpture of the head of Churchill . . .



Sketches Nemon made of Churchill at La Mamounia Hotel, Marrakesh, in January 1951

Afterwards, at mealtimes, my prolonged glances towards Churchill must have given an impression of rather rude attention. Occasionally I became aware of Churchill's studied return of my gaze. I became worried that such activity might be noticed by his Scotland Yard bodyguard, so I hastened to explain myself to this personage. He assured me that my anxiety was quite unnecessary. 'Mr Churchill is used to being looked at,' he replied, 'and he never notices anyone outside the circle of his personal guests. Look at him as long as you like – everyone else does.'

Despite that assurance, Nemon was aware of the possibility of Churchill's displeasure – even 'the possibility of my head making contact with a well-aimed dinner plate'.

He was, he recalled, eventually rescued by a mutual friend. He had met Sylvia Henley, a cousin of Churchill's, during the Blitz. Indeed, she had come to his rescue when he was being cold-shouldered as an impecunious artist by the stuffer members of the Allies Club in London. He could see she was puzzled at encountering Nemon in the poshest hotel in Marrakesh. After a few days she rang his room and asked why he was avoiding her. After hearing the explanation for his diffidence she begged him to show her the small sculpture he had just done of Churchill's head. Full of enthusiasm, Sylvia took it away to show to Churchill's wife. A few hours later Nemon received a note, dated 5 January 1951, from Mrs Churchill.

My dear Monsieur Némon

I should much like to possess the little bust you have made of my husband in terra cotta. Would you be kind and let me know your fee?

Would you allow me to say that I like it so much just as it is, and I think there is an element of risk in altering it. I have seen so many portraits and busts spoilt by attempting to get an exact likeness. Your bust represents to me my husband as I see him and as I think of him, and I would like to have it just as it is. It will be a great joy for me to possess it.


Yours sincerely

Clementine Churchill

This was exactly the kind of praise that Nemon appreciated . . . whomever it came from. He promised not to make any changes and, seizing the moment, said he hoped he might be given the opportunity to do other studies of her husband – 'possibly while he was busy painting'. She agreed.

Nemon remembered their joint expeditions with affection and amusement. He recalled that among Churchill's 'regular attendants' while he was painting was a little one-eyed goat; one day it disappeared, and Churchill's bodyguard was

January 15, 1951



My dear Monsieur Nemon
 I had no time before
 leaving for Tiershiv to
 reply to your letter.
 It is indeed your
 rows of 600 to wish
 to give me that
 beautiful little bust

of my husband.
 I shall always treasure
 it. Thank-you very
 very much.
 Yours sincerely
 Clementine Churchill

Clementine Churchill's
 letter of thanks for
 the little bust of her
 husband

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dispatched to find it – but would only pretend to search for it ‘for fear of being presented with a hundred one-eyed goats if the generous-hearted Berbers came to hear of the loss’. Although Churchill disparaged his own attempts at painting and referred to them often as ‘my daubs’ – ‘a child of seven could have done as well’, he told Nemon – the sculptor took all this as excessive modesty, noting that ‘wherever he travelled, he invariably consulted local painters about the particular qualities of the light where he may be painting’. Later, when they got to know each other better, Nemon allowed Churchill to sculpt his head – the only sculpture that Churchill ever attempted or realized. It is now in the studio in Chartwell.

Dimitri Dimancescu, a Romanian diplomat whose memoirs are presently being edited by his son Dan, has an altogether different version of the events that got the relationship off the ground. It is fair to say that in Nemon’s memoirs his recollections are not always factually accurate – for instance, he writes that Churchill was preoccupied with the building of the Berlin Wall during this period in Morocco, although that event occurred ten years later. But even on a personal level Dimancescu’s memory is quite different from Nemon’s.

The distinguished Romanian soldier-diplomat, who was given a Military Cross for his work in blowing up the Ploesti oil fields to deprive the advancing Germans in the First World War, was living with his wife in Marrakesh. They had met Churchill’s daughter Diana in London, and she was one of the large party at the Mamounia Hotel. The others, he recalls, were Mrs Churchill, Lord Cherwell, Sir Henry Pownall, Colonel and Mrs F.W. Deakin, Denis Kelly, two personal secretaries, Miss Sturdee and Miss Gemmel, the crew of the plane and ‘the always-present watchdog provided by Scotland Yard’. Miss Sturdee was the gatekeeper and key to anyone’s access to her much sought-after boss. She was

the ‘Chinese Wall . . . phone calls were cut short at the hotel’s switchboard, and those who managed by trickery to reach Miss Sturdee were met with a gentle but stern “I am sorry.”’ It seems that the social élite of Marrakesh were deeply disappointed by their failure to break down the barriers to social intimacy with their most distinguished visitor. Dimancescu was all the more astonished therefore to observe the success of a ‘Yugoslav sculptor [who] had a narrow head like Mephistopheles with a small moustache and a short pointed beard’. He added, only partly accurately, ‘Besides being a sculptor he was also a psychoanalyst and a friend of Sigmund Freud for whom he had created a life-size statue.’

The Romanian then claims Nemon ‘had come to the city to sculpt the head of the daughter of Antenor Patiño, inheritor of the Bolivian “Tin King” and that Señor Patiño was ‘footing his bills’. Then ‘by tipping the Head Waiter generously . . . he got a table facing the “Old Man” . . . Instead of eating he kept sketching, all the while annoying the restaurant’s most distinguished guest with his stares.’ This at least chimes with what Nemon remembered. But Dimancescu went much further. He claimed he ‘learnt from Miss Sturdee . . . that the management of the Mamounia has been asked to have Nemon seated at some other table’.

Then one day he appeared at our house, and I had to receive him. Nemon, whom I had never met, had not bothered to announce himself. He brought with him photos of his work which I immediately admired for its artistic qualities. My wife and I invited him for dinner, and till late at night we talked art and psychoanalysis. He was a master of both subjects, and I enjoyed listening to him. I was quickly convinced that he should do a statue of Churchill.

There followed a plan, claims Dimancescu, involving the powerful but volatile Pasha El Glaoui, known as the ‘Lord of the Atlas’, who agreed to fund this monumental statue, replacing a water fountain near the city’s casino with a large bronze statue of Churchill with ‘an unobstructed view of the Atlas mountains to the south’. But still ‘I did not have the courage to ask Churchill to sit for Nemon. And Nemon-the-artist would not produce a statue without seeing his subject in three dimensions.’ This is the point where a very different account is given of how Mrs Churchill came into the picture.

Dimancescu’s wife Ze was apparently by now getting rather fed up with the ever-present Nemon who would appear at their house ‘at any odd hours’.

One evening, thinking of a way to get rid of him, I said, ‘Look here. I have an idea. Why not try to make a clay model from a small bust I have of Churchill in my study.’ He immediately wanted it. The bust had seen better days. It had fallen one day, and the head had broken away from the shoulders. With some fish glue

and soldering metal I had reattached them. Moving his fingers over the bust, he said, ‘My hands are itching to work. I want to do something tonight.’ Grumbling as he left that it was a much younger-looking Churchill, he took it back to the Mamounia.

He produced a clay model twelve inches high. And somehow, without any of my doing, he got it through the ‘Chinese Wall’ and into Mrs Churchill’s hands.

Finally, this alternative version is back on track. Although the ambitious project for a much larger statue never got past the French authorities – they ‘would not hear of having a monument to Churchill before having one of the great Maréchal Lyautey’ (the first French Resident-General in Morocco from 1912 to 1925), Dimancescu recalls. It was also bad timing for its sponsor, the Pasha El Glaoui, who was starting a campaign to oust the Sultan of Morocco, Mohammed V, and who had just been banned from the royal palace for insolence.

But for Nemon the Moroccan affair was a total success. However it came about, the ice had been broken in Marrakesh. He not only had his introduction but also had attracted the personal approval, even friendship, of Winston Churchill. Back in England the relationship developed fast. A new royal commission was the first result. Before her coronation the young Queen had expressed a wish to have a marble bust of Churchill to put alongside his famous ancestor, the Duke of Marlborough, in the armoury of Windsor Castle. Churchill, once again Prime Minister, chose Nemon.

It was not a popular choice among those sculptors who felt their reputations



Nemon's marble bust of Winston Churchill commissioned by the Queen for Windsor Castle in the early 1950s

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
FALCON STUART



Churchill's 1954 sketch of Nemon drawn at Chequers when Churchill was Prime Minister
WITH KIND PERMISSION OF CHURCHILL HERITAGE

had been sufficiently established – two had been recently knighted – and who believed that membership of the Royal Academy put them way ahead of this upstart from Yugoslavia. ‘I was informed later’, wrote Nemon, ‘by Sir “Jock” Colville, Churchill’s private secretary, that Churchill resolutely stuck to his choice and disregarded the conventional thinking of the opposition.’

On 15 October 1952 Sir Owen Morshead, the Librarian at Windsor Castle, wrote to Nemon, ‘The choice of yourself as a sculptor commends itself to the Prime Minister, who is prepared to give you a sitting in order that the final touches may be added to the model which you have already done from life.’ In fact, a month later Churchill gave Nemon two separate sittings. On 20 November my father wrote to Sir Owen, ‘The progress of my work depends on this most unpredictable sitter. On Sunday, for instance, I moved to Chequers where I had a very pleasant contact in a relaxed setting. He said to his lordly guests that the honour which has befallen him at the hand of the Queen has touched him more than if she had bestowed upon him the Order of the Garter! So you were right; he is deeply moved and is very proud to be immortalized in company with his great ancestor the first Duke of Marlborough.’ (We children and my mother were immensely impressed that Churchill had sent his car to pick Nemon up.)

Nemon also did a portrait bust of Sir Owen himself which appears to be lost. I had hoped that Sir Owen’s daughter, Lady May, would lead me to it, but she said she remembered being offered the bust but it was too large for her flat; she didn’t know what became of it. Sir Owen’s other daughter, Phoebe Woollcombe, told me that her father kept a diary, now in the Royal Archives at Windsor. It might have provided a clue, but unfortunately the diaries are not available for public perusal.

Nemon remained an unabashed admirer of Churchill all his life. Yet sculpting him was never an easy or relaxed task, however much Churchill had championed him against the opposition of the arts establishment.

One consequence of Nemon’s closeness to Churchill immediately after his commission, when Nemon was still working on the bust, was his subject’s desire to turn the tables. Churchill decided that he should get his own back and try his hand at sculpture by sculpting Nemon’s head. ‘And so our duel began,’ Nemon recalled.

We had not been at work long when he became excited about the difficulties in which he found himself. His cigar began to come to pieces in his mouth and soon he was roaring like a lion over his prey. (It was after two o’clock in the morning, and Churchill had consumed his usual quantity of alcohol.) He shouted at me, ‘How on earth can I work when you keep moving?’ In the interest of continuing peace between us I kept still after that and, by doing so, lost an opportunity of making a real study of him.



But Churchill persisted and managed to finish the only sculpture he was ever to achieve. Nemon had it cast in bronze and wrote to Churchill later, 'I beg you not to underrate the artistic value of this work, which would be considered by any expert as outstanding for a first attempt.' The first cast of the bust can be seen in Churchill's study at Chartwell and another one is in the Churchill War Rooms in London.

As for the head destined for Windsor Castle, it turned out to be the first of many busts and statues Nemon would do of the Prime Minister, but my father was far from sure at the start how things would work out. He recalled:

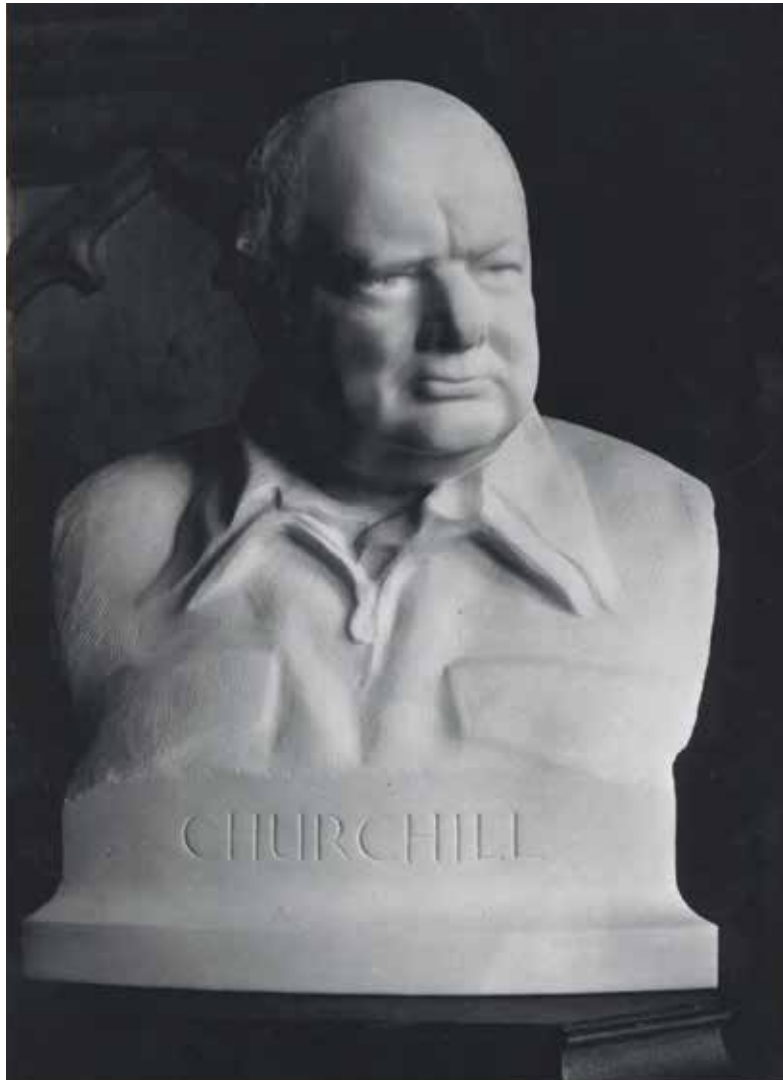
The portrait I made was the result of informal meetings at Chequers and at No. 10 Downing Street, where a room was put at my disposal. At No. 10 I worked on three heads at the same time, each showing a different aspect of Churchill. But I always dreaded the after-lunch sessions with my sitter as he was liable to be bellicose, challenging and deliberately provocative. Every time I lunched with him he always offered to sit for me after lunch, and I always dreaded it.

Nemon examining the bust Churchill made of him with his bust of Churchill looking on
PHOTOGRAPH BY FALCON STUART WITH KIND PERMISSION OF CHURCHILL HERITAGE

Churchill rarely made appointments with me, but one day he did so, and he was obviously in a tense mood. My heart sank as he entered the room and strode over to the three shrouded heads. He pointed to the nearest and roared, 'Show it to me.'

I uncovered it – the most dramatic of the three. I could see his anger rising, and I waited for the outburst. It soon came. 'You think I look like a crafty, shifty war-monger, do you? Is that what you think?' I hurriedly said that I had not intended to give that impression but had tried to bring out his determination and purpose. He gave further vent to his wrath with some remarks about his 'bulldog' image, an attitude he struck for the morale of the nation, saying he was not just a ferocious watchdog but a man compounded of many qualities including about 50 per cent humour.

The bust of Winston Churchill that Lady Churchham Carter said was 'the most magnificent of them all'



He demanded to be shown the second head. This satisfied him no better. He found the expression too ‘intimate’ for his taste and said that he wanted a portrait that would convey his features but make no statement; in short, a ‘well-mannered and civilized portrait in the style of the Old Masters’.

Fortunately, the third bust was considered satisfactory – Churchill conceded it was ‘civilized’. This was the one that was finished and stands today in the Queen’s Guard Chamber at Windsor Castle. But Nemon’s story of that frightening version of the judgement of Paris had an upbeat ending.

After Churchill stormed out I was sitting in an armchair in a thoroughly depressed state, wondering whether the best course would be for me to destroy all three models, when the door opened and he came back in. His temper had evaporated completely, and he apologized at once. He was extravagant in praise of my work. ‘Why, man, you’re a genius!’ he said, and although the words were most heartening I found it hard to believe them.

Some years later, on 1 July 1956, Sir Owen Morshead wrote to Nemon, partly to inform him that he would be requesting the Privy Purse to send (finally) the remaining payment but also to give his verdict on the Windsor Castle bust.

Now, my dear Nemon, let me say in all sincerity that I like the bust. It is, to my eye, a penetrating and noble representation. It is too big; and this is wilful of you, because you know that I wanted it smaller. But the ingenious idea of placing it in the east window largely counteracts its being out of scale; and for my part I am content. What I wish chiefly to see is whether its present position will satisfy the Queen. If so, all is well.

The Queen was indeed content. Three weeks later Sir Owen reported her reaction. ‘But I think it is excellent, don’t you? And it looks well there, too; the only thing being that it shows the wrong side of his face.’ Sir Owen quickly pointed out that, placed on the flank of the room, it was immediately seen by the public. ‘She was quite contented,’ he assured Nemon. ‘It was evident that she really does regard it as a success and a desirable acquisition.’ So relief all round.

This was far from the last bust Nemon did of Winston Churchill; indeed, the rest of the family queued up to have his magic fingers press their likenesses into shape.

It might be thought that Nemon himself would have become rich and famous as a result of all these commissions. My father, never pushy and always eager to please, accepted the honour, as he saw it, as being sufficient reward for being

