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Remembering D-Day

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 7, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday was the anniversary of D-Day. I had a flurry of meetings and then was unable to find the citation I wanted to recall that dread and fateful day. I could not find the story in any of the three biographies of Churchill I have in my library, nor in his war memoirs. But, this morning I was rewarded when I consulted Jon Meacham?s ?Franklin and Winston.?

Churchill plunged himself into the planning of ?Overlord,? the code name for the Normandy invasion. Meacham relates the story of an after-midnight meeting held at Downing Street to discuss the precise timing of the invasion. Generals Eisenhower and Ismay were present among others. According to Admiral Alan Kirk, ?They were arguing back and forth, back and forth, what should be done. Finally Mr. Churchill lost patience, and he smote the table and said, ?Well, what I would like to know is, when did William cross?? The accused stood mute. No one could remember. He was obviously talking about William the Conqueror. Finally Pug Ismay, standing behind Mr. Churchill, coughed into his hand and said, ?Sir, I think it was 1066.??

Churchill drily pointed out that knew the year but he wanted to know the month and the day. No one could recall. ?Class dismissed,? Churchill thundered.

The episode confirms all that was most wonderful, and most difficult, about Churchill. His historical knowledge easily outranked that of any other public official, civilian or military, engaged in the planning. He doubtlessly knew the effect his question would have on those in the room, an effect he achieved. But, no one thought to point out to Mr. Churchill, nor did it evidently seem to matter to him, that William had sailed in the opposite direction.

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