

# The Many Facets of History: A Study on the Accounts of the Dunkirk Evacuation

DU Xing-chi

Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

This paper adopts a New Historicism approach to examine the shaping of the history of the Dunkirk evacuation through an analysis of Winston Churchill's historic speech *We Shall Fight on the Beaches*, Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, and Christopher Nolan's film *Dunkirk*. The research reveals that by uncovering and representing the neglected stories of marginalized groups in *Atonement* and *Dunkirk*, new evidentiary threads both enrich and contest the History embodied in Churchill's speech. Consequently, these alternative accounts both challenge and complement the prevailing historical discourse.

*Keywords:* Dunkirk evacuation, The History, histories

While the blockbuster *Dunkirk* garnered significant acclaim and was nominated for the Best Picture Oscar, it sparked indignation among French media outlets. Critics argued that the pivotal contribution of the French military in the evacuation was overlooked, thereby showing disrespect to the history. Likewise, following the release of the novel *Atonement*, its author was amid criticisms for deviance from the widely accepted narrative of the Dunkirk evacuation. These instances underscore a prevailing contention: is history an absolute truth or merely a known version? Is history confined to official records, and does a singular, uncontested history exist? Much like how a diamond exhibits over fifty facets, each capable of shimmering brilliantly under the right light, history too possesses multifarious dimensions.

New Historicism underscores this multiplicity, striving not just to illuminate obscured narratives but also to unravel the mechanisms behind their obscurity and their eventual resurgence. This paper, grounded in three distinct accounts of the Dunkirk evacuation: *We Shall Fight on the Beaches* (1940), the speech delivered by the Prime minister Winston Churchill; *Atonement* (2001), a novel by the son of a veteran, McEwan; and *Dunkirk* (2017), a film by the son of an air force veteran, Christopher Nolan, aims to probe into the forming process of "The History", the attempts to recover related hidden histories, and the dynamics between these two constructs. Structurally, the paper unfolds in four sections: initially, an examination of Churchill's speech reveals the process through which it solidified as the dominant historical narrative, and how dissident voices were suppressed; subsequently, analyses of the novel and film explore how previously muted histories have found avenues for expression; thereafter, reflections on the historiographical process informed by this case study are presented; and finally, conclusions are drawn.

### The Forming of “The History”—We Shall Fight on the Beaches

Assuming the mantle of British Prime Minister on May 10, 1940, Winston Churchill promptly established his war cabinet within twenty-four hours and, on May 13, delivered the momentous speech *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat*. In this historic oration, he fervently urged the nation to stand firm against their adversaries until the end, calling for a unified front in the face of adversity: “I feel entitled at this juncture, at this time, to claim the aid of all and to say, come then, let us go forward together with our united strength” (ThoughtCo: “Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat” Speech by Winston Churchill). Despite the rousing sentiment, this bold appeal did not go uncontested, as dissenting opinions regarding his rallying cry emerged.

Initially, questions surrounded the solidity of allied commitment. Doubts abounded regarding France’s determination to persist in the conflict, with whispers of “considerable doubts over the French willingness to continue the war” (Wiki: We Shall Fight on the Beaches). This was exacerbated when the French commander’s plea for reinforcements prior to the Dunkirk evacuation was met with the British war cabinet’s resolve that “the British priority must be to prepare its own defenses” (Wiki: The Speech), a decision effectively halting further aid. Furthermore, domestic spirits were dampened. After the Dunkirk evacuation, Mass Observation, a social research organization reported that “civilian morale in many areas as zero... Only half the population expected Britain to fight on and the feelings of thousands were summed up as: This is not our war—this is a war of the high-up people who use long words and have different feelings” (Wiki: The Speech).

Amid dissidents, Churchill delivered his stirring address, *We Shall Fight on the Beaches*, in which he forewarned of an impending German invasion, aiming to reinvigorate public morale and reinforce Allied unity. Central to his oratory were two pivotal messages: Firstly, he exhorted the cultivation of heroic resolve in the face of war, inspiring a spirit of unwavering bravery and sacrifice amongst his listeners:

There never has been, ...in all the world, in all the history of war, such an opportunity for youth. The Knights of the Round Table, the Crusaders, ... Every morn brought forth a noble chance/ And every chance brought forth a noble knight. (Wiki: The Speech)

Secondly, he underscored the paramount importance of the Allied bond, emphasizing that collective strength and cooperation were indispensable in withstanding and overcoming the adversarial threat:

The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. (Wiki: The Speech)

The speech struck a profound chord with its audience. The House was so moved that “several Labour members cried” (Wiki: The Speech). A Labour MP admitted “That was worth 1,000 guns and the speeches of 1,000 years” (Wiki: The Speech). Observations by American journalist H.R. Knickerbocker the following year noted that “With Churchill’s picture these words are placarded in homes and offices throughout the British Empire” (Wiki: The Speech). Consequently, skepticism about the war’s importance faded, giving way to a unified determination to stand alongside Allies and persevere in the fight. The recollection of the Dunkirk evacuation, lauded by Churchill as “a miracle of deliverance” (Wiki: The Speech), coalesced into a unified and shared memory as the Miracle of Dunkirk.

### Histories Represented—Atonement and Dunkirk

The Dunkirk evacuation has been deeply ingrained in British cultural identity, with successive generations, nurtured on its tales, feeling compelled to document this history, as evidenced by figures like Ian McEwan and Christopher Nolan. However, their renditions, informed by meticulous research, diverge from the government-crafted wartime narrative that glorifies the ‘Miracle of Dunkirk’ as a collective memory. In *Atonement*, McEwan depicted the scene of evacuation on the beach, which was based on the real experience of his father. Departing from the triumphant emphasis on the rescue of 338,000 soldiers, he brings to light the somber reality that “more than 50,000 British troops were unable to escape the Continent” (Britannica: Dunkirk evacuation), thereby underscoring that,

If you’re writing about the retreat to Dunkirk, as I do in *Atonement*, you can’t avoid the fact that tens of thousands of people died in that retreat, and yet we have a rather fond of memory of it in the national narrative. (The Telegraph: Recluse Speaks out to Defend McEwan)

Christopher Nolan, echoing a similar sentiment as a child of an air force veteran, admitted to feeling a profound “sense of responsibility to tell the real-life story” (The Guardian: Dunkirk review). In conversations with veterans, one candidly shared that “in the real war, you do not know what a certain action means; you only know that you are trying best to kill enemy and to survive; and in the end, you often do not know whether you win or lose” (The Guardian: Dunkirk review). Inspired by these heartfelt disclosures, Nolan resolved to craft a cinematic narrative centered around ordinary soldiers, endeavoring to capture the authentic pandemonium and pervasive uncertainty that defined their experiences.

Thus, their creative endeavors give voice to the underrepresented, marginalized, and deliberately overlooked narratives of war.

In the first place, in times of conflict, as Churchill himself espoused, heroism is trumpeted as “an opportunity for youth”, “a noble chance” to bring forth “a noble knight” (Wiki: The Speech); thereby silencing the experiences of those who do not fit the heroic mold—those for whom mere survival and the longing for home are the unspoken, unheralded goals. However, the central characters in these two works prioritize survival above all else, challenging the conventional hero archetype. In *Atonement*, the protagonist’s focus narrows to the primal instinct of personal survival: “his thoughts had shriveled to the tiny, stubborn kernel of his own survival” (McEwan, 2002, p. 217). Drafted into service, it is the promise of reuniting with Cecilia that fuels his resilience against the agony of injury, exhaustion, and the looming “fear of capture” (McEwan, 2002, p. 226). Similarly, in *Dunkirk*, the incessant refrain of “home” underscores the film, with soldiers relentlessly pursued by the specter of death, desperately seeking escape. These main characters stand in stark contrast to Churchill’s idealized portrait of unyielding, sacrificial heroes. For them, fear supersedes national duty or the pursuit of glory, reflecting perhaps a more authentic depiction of war’s essence for the common soldier.

Secondly, while politicians, commanders, and heroic soldiers often take center stage in official narratives, ordinary individuals are typically relegated to the margins, portrayed merely as incidental characters. Yet, they too are deeply enmeshed in the conflict, contributing and sacrificing in equal measure—active participants in the war’s complex tapestry. Moving beyond the anonymous statistics found in formal records, *Atonement* paints livings of ordinary people at “deeper emotional levels” (McEwan, 2002, p. 315): an old French woman who

offers the soldiers food and drinks despite her hatred feeling toward war and soldiers for the loss of her son in WWI, a gypsy who treats the soldiers with generous hospitality, a mother and son caught in an airstrike. Through the writings, ordinary people's contributions as well as sufferings during the war time are presented minutely. Similarly, in *Dunkirk*, Nolan elevates the role of civilians to parity with soldiers, dedicating nearly a third of the film to highlighting their valiant efforts in the evacuation. The narrative intertwines three strands—the mole, the sea, and the air—with “the sea” segment particularly focusing on the hundreds of civilian boats braving gunfire to rescue stranded soldiers, symbolically asserting the civilians as heroes in their own right. By positioning everyday people on par with leaders and combat heroes, these works resurrect histories that were once pushed to the fringes, restoring the multifaceted and inclusive nature of the wartime experience.

Additionally, the evacuation narratives prominently featured an emphasis on unity and solidarity, as evident in Churchill's speeches where any discord among Allies or within the military ranks was consciously omitted. However, both *Atonement* and *Dunkirk* present alternative perspectives that challenge this unified front. In *Dunkirk*, a discourse subtly revealed the duplicity of the British government toward its allies: “Publicly, Churchill told them, ‘arm in arm, leaving together’; privately, we need our army back.” (Nolan: *Dunkirk*) Likewise, “there was no show of common cause” in *Atonement*, as

Among the British troops the view was that the French had let them down. No will to fight for their own country. Irritated at being pushed aside, the tommies swore, and taunted their allies with shouts of ‘Magenot!’ For their part, the poilus must have heard rumors of an evacuation... ‘Cowards! To the boats! Go shit in your pants!’ then they were gone. (McEwan, 2002, p. 234)

In the speech *We Shall Fight on the Beaches*, the eulogy was accredited to the Royal Air Force by Churchill, stating that “there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted. It was gained by the Air Force. I will pay my tribute to these young airmen” (Wiki: The Speech). Conversely, *Atonement* presents a contrasting scene where a Royal Air Force member is confronted with the accusatory question, “Where were you when they killed my mate?” As the intensity of the query provokes an enraged response, the RAF soldier was abused heavily by a mob of soldiers as if “His slight frame contained every cause of an army's defeat” (McEwan, 2002, p. 251). War, in this depiction, has stripped soldiers of reason and compassion, turning them to blame and violence against an easy target. Likewise, in *Dunkirk*, when a group of soldiers strive to float the stranded boat on the sea, one soldier is forced with gun to get off to save weight. Fate, as the protagonist laments, “pushed through the bowels of men” (Nolan: *Dunkirk*). These narratives expose the harsh realities beneath the veneer of unity, revealing the dehumanizing effects of war that erode empathy and drive individuals to acts of desperation and cruelty.

Consequently, the officially sanctioned narrative of the evacuation as “a miracle of deliverance, achieved by valor, by perseverance, by perfect discipline...” (Wiki: The Speech), is contested by the portrayals in *Atonement* and *Dunkirk*, which bring to light the forgotten histories of the overlooked, the marginalized, and those deliberately silenced.

### **Conclusion: The History, or Histories?**

The construction of “The History” surrounding the Dunkirk evacuation underscores the pivotal influence of politics and power dynamics. The crafting of this narrative, aimed at bolstering morale and fostering a united

front during wartime, necessitated the suppression of dissenting perspectives—a practice that carries with it several inherent drawbacks.

First, attempts to suppress dissident voices often mystify “The History”, deliberately overlooking the human agency in its making. “History, after all, depends on human beings, their choices, judgments, actions, and ideas” (Arnold, 2000, p. 118). People, driven by their own political aspirations and class interests, are not infallible in their decision-making, rendering “The History” constructed potentially flawed; hence, conclusions, decisions, or strategies derived from such “History” may prove unreliable. Second, the quest for a monolithic truth within “The History” disregards the multiplicity of truths, and the illusion of possessing absolute truth can foster arbitrariness and tyranny in its holder, leading to mistakes or catastrophes. As in *Atonement*, the stubbornness of young Briony in possessing “The Truth” of what happened ended in a disaster that cost her the whole life to seek salvation. Third, “The History” tends to cater to certain interest demand, ignoring groups on the periphery. Just as politicians, commanders, and heroes wield influence in shaping history, so do peripheral actors, such as the myriad civilian boats involved in the soldiers’ rescue. If “The History” turns a deaf ear to their interest pursuit, they would be inclined to act out to make themselves heard. Consequently, while suppressed, these diverse histories do not remain silent indefinitely; they find opportunities to resurface.

During wartime, the overriding objective centers on achieving victory, which leads to an emphasis on heroism and unity. In the post-war era, however, society is often gripped by a collective trauma, the aftermath of civilization’s ravages. This shared emotional scar, born of collective tragedy, fosters an environment more receptive to alternative narratives. Consequently, the tales of everyday soldiers and ordinary citizens, previously obscured by political agendas, emerge through mediums like literature and cinema, providing fresh perspectives that contribute to the shaping of new histories of those events.

Then should the histories serve as the subversion of “The History”? As McEwan stated in the novel, “Since artist are politically impotent, they must use this time to develop at deeper emotional levels” (McEwan, 2002, p. 315). These different histories are not necessarily contradictory; they can serve as supplements to each other to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the past. Thus, the histories are supposed to decompose the uniqueness of “The History”, but not its reasonableness.

Indeed, as Mr. Arnold insightfully posits, history fundamentally represents “above all else an argument” (Arnold, 2000, p. 13), an ongoing discourse whose conclusions may evolve with the emergence of fresh evidence and the introduction of novel viewpoints. The narratives presented in *Atonement* and *Dunkirk* by recuperating the stories of the overlooked and marginalized, introduce new strands that augment or contests “The History” formed by *We Shall Fight on the Beaches*. Thus, history is not static but malleable, open to debate and prone to revision. If “The History” constitutes one version of past events, then it stands alongside—and indeed invites—a multitude of other histories, each contributing to a more nuanced, multifaceted understanding of our collective past.

## References

- Arnold, J. H. (2000). *History: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
 “Britannica: Dunkirk evacuation.” [www.britannica.com/event/Dunkirk-evacuation](http://www.britannica.com/event/Dunkirk-evacuation). Accessed 16 Jan, 2024.  
*Dunkirk*. Dir. Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2017. ygdy8. Web.16 Jan 2024.  
 McEwan, I. (2002). *Atonement*. Vintage.

- “The Telegraph: Recluse Speaks out to Defend McEwan Reynolds.” *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1536152/Recluse-speaks-out-to-defend-McEwan.html> Dec.2006. Accessed 16Jan, 2024.
- “The Guardian: Dunkirk review.” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jul/23/dunkirk-review-terrifyingly-immersive-christopher-nolan>. Accessed 16Jan, 2024.
- “ThoughtCo: ‘Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat’ Speech by Winston Churchill.” *ThoughtCo*, <https://www.thoughtco.com/blood-toil-tears-and-sweat-winston-churchill-1779309>. Accessed 16Jan, 2024.
- “Wiki: We Shall Fight on the Beaches.” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We\\_shall\\_fight\\_on\\_the\\_beaches](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_shall_fight_on_the_beaches). Accessed 16Jan, 2024.