

rable, familiar, and wholesome about American life.

Ironically, it is the worship of boundless progress and the belief in unconditional freedom that have relaxed manners and morals, loosened the bonds of family, and generally dimmed the prospects for the future. Bryce no doubt would have objected to this judgment. He admired above all the confidence and vigor of Americans, who felt "in their veins the pulse of youthful strength" and who had "already achieved many things which the Old World has longed for in vain." The Americans, Bryce contended, had kept alive the faith in progress and the hope for a better world.

Yet Bryce could not have endorsed, or even imagined, ambition without lim-

its or freedom without responsibility. George Santayana, a younger contemporary of Bryce, once declared that "absolute liberty and English liberty are incompatible and mankind must make a painful and brave choice between them." That many, perhaps most, Americans no longer recognize the necessity of such a distinction is astonishing, perplexing, and disheartening. The new edition of *The American Commonwealth* has thus appeared at a critical hour,¹ for Bryce's masterpiece inspires the imaginative reconstruction of the past and the sober assessment of the future that we today so desperately require.

1. *The American Commonwealth*, 2 vols., by James Bryce (Indianapolis, 1995) Vol. I: 720 pp. Vol. II: 992 pp.

The Truth of Whittaker Chambers

Milton Hindus

Milton Hindus, a member of the founding faculty of Brandeis University, taught there for thirty-three years, retiring as the Edytha Macy Gross Professor of Humanities. His first publication in *Modern Age* (Spring 1960) was his portmanteau review of Boris Pasternak's *I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography* and N. Narokov's *The Chains of Fear*. In appraising Sam Tanenhaus's exemplary biography of Whittaker Chambers, Hindus judiciously probes those qualities of character that Chambers's liberal enemies have long sought to reject. In a drama of treason, betrayal, and expiation, the picture of Chambers that finally emerges is one of a sympathetic, intelligent, and sensitive man long misrepresented and misunderstood. Both biographer and reviewer show here that if Alger Hiss was among "liars in high places," Whittaker Chambers was his own man—a man of truth.

IN THE WAKE OF THE DEATH of Alger Hiss, more than thirty years after the death of the man principally responsible for the ex-

posure of his double life which he stubbornly denied under mounting evidence that he was lying, a long, detailed, and

fascinating biography of Whittaker Chambers has been published.¹ It should put to rest, at least among persons capable of attending to reason, any lingering doubts about his truthfulness, good faith, or suspicion that he was a mere tool of Republican enemies bent on discrediting the New Deal.

Sam Tanenhaus's new biography of Whittaker Chambers has garnered admiration and approval from such different quarters as Arthur Schlesinger, Alistair Cooke, and John Kenneth Galbraith on the liberal side, and William Buckley on the conservative side. I have come across only one sour dissenting note by Sidney Blumenthal, predictably enough in *The New Yorker*, the editors of which for many years now seem to have been carrying a torch for Alger Hiss.²

Tanenhaus has not written a hagiography. He is non-partisan and unbiased in his approach. He perceives Chambers not as a man oscillating between the extreme of commitment to revolution and commitment to reaction and counter-revolution, but as a sympathetic man, in his later years especially, who valiantly labored to attain a balanced view of the world and its politics. In other words, the biographer takes a nuanced approach to a man who has been long crudely caricatured and stereotyped.

Far from being in relentless pursuit of the destruction of the character of Alger Hiss, it transpires through this massively researched and detailed narrative, that in fact Chambers for a long time tried to save Hiss from the consequences of his own folly by coming forward and frankly acknowledging it. Tanenhaus presents his subject as a serious and moral man, and a writer endowed with exceptional literary talents, equally evident when he was defending the freedom of the United States or misguidedly attempting to destroy it in the service of an inimical

dictatorship and tyranny. Chambers emerges from the patient pages of Tanenhaus's book as a highly gifted and even unique Emersonian individualist or maverick, as pitiable as he was admirable because he was trapped in the modern world, too much in a hurry to recognize that he was anything other than an organization man who had absconded from the service of Stalin in order to carry out the orders of Henry Luce and *Time* magazine. He could not, by any stretch of the imagination, possibly be his own man! It is little wonder, in retrospect, that just as the case against Hiss turned a corner and the facts spoke for themselves, Chambers should have attempted to kill himself, so ashamed was he of the role of informer which circumstance compelled him to play.

The sequence of events that led to the opening up of the Russian spy operation that had penetrated high levels of the United States government prior to World War II must be kept in mind. Chambers had exposed the disloyalty of Alger Hiss and various officials in government in 1939 during an interview with Adolf Berle, Liberal Party leader in New York, an assistant secretary of state in the Roosevelt administration, and a man who had direct access to the President. This daring disclosure of a sinister secret conspiracy was provoked by several things. The first had occurred in 1937-38, when, after serving Russian military intelligence underground for half a dozen years, Chambers became alarmed at the Moscow show trials, which destroyed the makers of the Russian revolution wholesale and condemned or executed or caused to defect many of those in the military or diplomatic services of the Soviets whom Chambers knew. With good reason to fear for his life because of his dangerous knowledge, Chambers had gone into hiding with his wife and two small children after breaking off suddenly from the espionage network and

tried to convince some of the associates who had worked with him to do likewise. The second and even more urgent and serious provocation came in 1939 when, on August 23, in a surprise that stunned the world a pact between Stalin's Soviet Russia and Hitler's Nazi Germany, hitherto the most deadly enemies, was concluded in Moscow and Berlin, secret protocols of which provided for dismemberment and occupation of Poland, the little states adjoining Russia, and large segments of eastern and central Europe. The pact also opened the door to a general European war in which England and France, ill-prepared and hopelessly outgunned, especially in air power and in tanks, seemed to face huge odds against an overwhelmingly powerful and vaingloriously militaristic totalitarian Germany.

Imaginative and even sophisticated people like Secretary Berle, not to mention private persons like Chambers, could be excused for fearing the involvement of the United States in the hostilities threatening to engulf much of the world. It was this that moved Chambers to warn the government of the dangers of treason, subversion, and espionage with which it was threatened. He realized vividly the risks to which his action exposed him. Berle, too, was alarmed sufficiently to pass on his information to the Commander-in-Chief. But FDR, with supreme scepticism and the invincible self-confidence which he shared with the America that elected him again and again, brushed the warning aside as of no consequence and perhaps only another of the deep-laid plots of his domestic enemies to discredit his New Deal as communist-inspired. The result was that Chambers was convinced that he had wasted his breath and risked mortal danger to himself in vain. He waited impatiently to be contacted by the FBI or other security services of the government in order to confirm and to explore

the danger he had revealed, but it was as if he had never spoken at all. He felt understandably frustrated; he also felt that he had fulfilled his duty and owed nothing more to a government complacent or stupid enough to treat him as a non-person.

Almost ten tumultuous years had to pass, a devastating global war to be fought, and Stalinist absorption of almost half of Germany and virtually all of eastern Europe before America would awaken to its own peril and become alert to the fact that it was threatened by aggression from without and betrayal, disloyalty, and subversion from within. Chambers in the interim had achieved a successful career in journalism, rising to be in charge of foreign news at *Time* magazine (in which strategic post he had done his utmost to counter Soviet disinformation and propaganda); he had also acquired additional land for his farm in Maryland, which had a symbolic and almost mystical significance in his mind, giving him not merely a material but a spiritual stake in the survival of a free American republic. But he could hardly forget his painful rebuff in 1939. He was no longer of a mind to volunteer his services to an unheeding country. He had to be summoned by a congressional committee before he would give his testimony. In its obituary of Alger Hiss, the *New York Times* reported that Chambers had appeared as a voluntary witness. That is not so, unless appearance in answer to a subpoena to answer questions under threat of punishment for failure to do so is defined as voluntary compliance. There is no doubt that earlier Chambers had been eager to share the full extent of what he had learned with constituted authority. But the refusal to listen and to take him seriously by those with the greatest responsibility for national security had made him cautious and reluctant. He did not wish to injure friends who might have acted be-

latedly on his advice to them to break away from the Soviet underground. The information that he had shared freely with Adolf Berle in 1939 had to be wrung from him drop by painful drop in 1948.

Such is the slippery ground on which the famous case against Alger Hiss originated. It is often thought that Chambers was the sole witness against Hiss. That is far from the truth. Credible doubts about the loyalty of Hiss had surfaced long before Chambers came forward in 1948. It had separated him from his post and security clearance in the Department of State, so that by the summer of 1948 he was seeking the presidency of the Carnegie Foundation, a private but very prestigious organization dedicated to the preservation of international peace. It would be a fitting capstone to a career that had reached its high point in the role he had played in the formation of the United Nations. But when Chambers repeated openly part of what he had said in confidence in 1939 to Adolf Berle, Hiss immediately stepped forward not only to give him the lie but also, and, more astonishingly, to say that he had never known his accuser. The personable ex-government official suggested that his adversary was an *lago* who, with motiveless malignity, was bent on the destruction of an honorable, long-trying, and long-tested public servant. Democratic partisans, right up to the Secretary of State, the President himself, and a Supreme Court Justice closely identified with the New Deal, rallied to his defense. Few besides a freshman Representative in Congress from California, and those who had some knowledge of the Communist movement with its dogma that the real enemy of progress was right here at home in the shape of greedy capitalists whose executive committee was the government of the United States, were prepared to take the charges seriously.

Hiss, however, had been cagey enough to deny he had known a person named

Whittaker Chambers and claimed he did not recognize his picture in the papers. A confrontation arranged by the committee revived his memory, but he insisted he had known Chambers slightly under the name George Crosley. The obituary of Hiss mistakenly asserted that this was a pseudonym used by Chambers. But though Chambers admitted to the use of false names, he denied ever having used this particular one, and Hiss, being challenged, could produce no one other than his wife Priscilla who recalled George Crosley. He appears to have been a figment of Hiss's fertile imagination.

Hiss proved very adept at lawyerly evasions, but he could not wholly evade becoming entangled in the web of deceit he wove or to offset the straightforward, detailed, and verifiable account given by Chambers. It eventually resulted in an ill-fated suit for slander filed by Hiss against Chambers—a suit that compelled Chambers to produce documentary evidence of Hiss's disloyalty. The statute of limitations prevented Hiss from being tried on a charge of espionage, but he was indicted by the Department of Justice for perjury and, after two jury trials, finally convicted to spend forty-four months in prison.

From Tanenhaus's investigation-in-depth of the famous case, few characters emerge as unscathed as Whittaker Chambers himself and the prosecutor Thomas F. Murphy who argued the case against Hiss. Among those who share in the discredit are many of the heavy-weight pundits and bellwethers of the intellectual and the journalistic community like Walter Lippmann, James Reston, Joseph Alsop, Marquis Childs, and A.J. Liebling of *The New Yorker*. Tanenhaus's conclusions are similar to those reached by the historian Allen Weinstein, who began his study *Perjury* with a bias in favor of Hiss but concluded that Chambers was the more trustworthy.³ Perhaps the greatest discredit of all fell

upon the professor of psychiatry, Dr. Carl Binger, who regarded Chambers, without examination, as a psychotic personality, but who was turned into a laughingstock by the clever cross-examination of Tom Murphy, who was treated with disdain by Hiss on the witness stand, but who turns out, in Tanenhaus's account, to be a sophisticated reader of French fiction and an enthusiast for the work of Marcel Proust.

The defense of Alger Hiss seemed to stop at nothing in its determination to besmirch the character of Whittaker Chambers. The lowest point was reached in its homophobic appeal to the prejudice of the jury. It found evidence of Chambers's deviant sexuality in some obscure verses he had published in a magazine that had achieved notoriety by pirating chapters of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, at that time judged as obscene and forbidden postal entry to the United States. Weinstein's *Perjury* revealed that the prosecution feared a full-fledged attack upon Chambers as a sometime homosexual. In anticipation of it, Chambers gave an unsigned statement about his occasional homosexual experiences before his marriage to Esthaer Shemitz, to whom he had been scrupulously faithful and which had nothing to do with the derelictions of which Hiss stood accused. Ultimately, this proved unnecessary since the Hiss defense did not raise the issue, except perhaps indirectly in the psychiatric testimony designed to arouse doubts about the soundness of Chambers's mind.

The one thing lacking in Tanenhaus's otherwise admirable biography is its failure to do justice to Chambers's poetic ambition and the influence of Walt Whitman upon him. In Whitman's verse Chambers heard the ebb and flow of the tides of his native Long Island. "It was as if, by plugging up my ears, I were listening to my own blood pound." When it comes to literature, Tanenhaus is in-

clined to credit the power over Chambers of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* with its international emphasis upon the plight of "the wretched of the earth." That influence no doubt existed, especially upon the earlier part of Chambers's life. But his recovery from his revolutionary obsession and his rediscovery of the ties which brought him back to his patriotic feelings for his native land and his determination to fend off its enemies, foreign and domestic, undoubtedly owed something to the great singer of America, whose conviction it was that the greatest reward awaiting a true American poet is that his country would one day embrace him with the same love with which he had embraced it.

The odds against Chambers's truth prevailing against the simulacrum Alger Hiss seemed for a time insuperable. That it did prevail eventually is owing not so much to support by fellow journalists and intellectuals (who, in Tanenhaus's account, consigned him, in his final years, to an exile and isolation exceeding that of the convicted Alger Hiss), but to the common people who recognized him basically as one of their own, as well as to a minority of his intellectual and professional peers. The politicians who made successful careers on the strength of Chambers's real suffering (even martyrdom) get short shrift from his sympathetic biographer. This includes not only the opportunistic demagogue Senator Joseph McCarthy, whom Chambers, after a brief flirtation, recognized as an embarrassment to the anti-communist cause, but also Richard Nixon, to whom, despite his failings at a crucial point in the case, Chambers himself remained grateful for providing him with the opportunity to make his original breakthrough to public understanding.

Praiseworthy as is Tanenhaus's justification of Chambers against his numerous detractors, the faults he himself finds with his subject's judgments have a qual-

ity of wisdom in hindsight. The biographer's own liberal equipoise is at odds with the intense poetic enthusiasm of Chambers. He emerges from this stringent examination as a "true believer," as likely to go off the rails in one direction as he is in an opposite direction at another time. But without such extremes of commitment, he would never have become involved with the anti-American Soviet spy operation in the first place, or been able to muster the courage and personal self-sacrifice needed to expose this operation to the world. His story remains relevant because it involved a

soul-wrenching conversion and a reordering of personal faith which presented his country with one more chance to escape the constricting bonds of authoritarian socialism and to preserve the liberty of its institutions, imperfect, lethargic, slow-moving, and maddeningly inefficient as these sometimes appear to be.

1. Sam Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* (New York, 1997). 2. Sidney Blumenthal, "The Cold War and the Closet: The True Legacy of Whittaker Chambers," *The New Yorker*, March 17, 1997, 112-117. 3. Allen Weinstein, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* (New York, 1978).

The Well-Wrought Critic

Stephen Gurney

Stephen Gurney is a scholar-critic who serves as Professor of English at Bemidji State University in Minnesota. His review of *Gustave Le Bon: The Man and His Works*, edited by Alice Widener, under the title "A Neglected Prophet," was his first contribution to *Modern Age* (Spring 1981). In the review-essay that follows, Gurney applauds the wisdom and insight found in Cleanth Brooks's literary criticism. Brooks, he stresses, calls us back to the humane values that present-day academic nihilists have torn out of discussions of literature. Gurney insists that Brooks's achievement helps to inspire the "remnant of the loyal" to preserve and to transmit those axiomatic principles that undergird the critical discipline. In his own publications Gurney has consistently exemplified this loyalty.

CLEANTH BROOKS's last collection of essays, *Community, Religion, and Literature* (1995), gives us pause for both celebration and lament. His discernment is undiminished in this volume in which devotees of *The Well-Wrought Urn*—Brooks's most famous work—will find further examples of those intricate and

highly attentive readings which characterize this critic's analyses of the masterpieces of English poetry. In perusing these, however, one cannot but reflect on the radical change which has taken place in the academy since the height of Brooks's influence, and how far we have fallen from that golden age of literary