

BOOK REVIEWS

Witness. By Whittaker Chambers. New York: Random House, 1952. Pp. 808. \$5.00.

On the morning of Wednesday, January 25, 1950, United States District Court Judge Henry Goddard passed sentence on a correct and cultured Harvard graduate of old New England Quaker stock—Alger Hiss, president of the Carnegie Endowment for World Peace and former official of the State Department and other New Deal government agencies. He was to serve two sentences concurrently, five years on the first count and five years on the second count of an indictment charging violation of the federal perjury statute.¹ Several months later, Hiss, his petition for a writ of certiorari having been denied by the United States Supreme Court,² went to prison. His ordeal, which had begun on August 3, 1948, when David Whittaker Chambers, senior editor of *Time* magazine, implicated him in communist espionage in this country before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, took on a new form. He descended into a lower circle of the Inferno.

Many Americans, particularly among the socially and educationally favored, remained convinced of his innocence. But a quite different opinion was held by the Un-American Activities Committee, the grand jury, the majority of the first district court jury, and all the second one. Those sensitive to the complex significance of the trial found in it far more than the downfall of one man. It was as difficult to determine who or what had been victors in what encounters as it was to know whether, in fact, an innocent man had been deprived of his liberty and his good repute. Something had happened that touched upon the fundamental civil rights of all, but just what was unclear. Alger Hiss, if properly convicted, was guilty also of betraying his country, his friends, and the set of ideals labeled "liberalism," identified as he was with the New Deal and its social experimentation. If Hiss was guilty of perjury, he was probably also guilty of espionage, and Americans could never again dismiss communism as an outlandish foreign philosophy which appealed only to a disreputable lunatic fringe. Evidently it had the power to drive proper and intelligent American gentlemen to treason. What had appeared to many to be witch-hunting by political reactionaries began to come uncomfortably close to disclosing real spectres of present danger to the United States government. No longer could the receptivity of the 1930's to left-wing views be invoked to excuse early lapses on the part of upright citizens without a careful look at the present to see whether what had budded as youthful idealism had flowered into the noisome Stalinist

¹ 62 Stat. 773, 18 U.S.C.A. § 1621 (1950).

² *Hiss v. United States*, 340 U.S. 948 (1951).

weed. Fear of the enemy who masquerades as a friend elicited a tendency to stress protection from such foes at the expense of protection of the individual's freedoms of speech, press, and association. It gradually filtered into public consciousness that to be an effective agent of a foreign power, one must have first of all the characteristic of not appearing to be what he is.

Seldom does as much burning emotion surround a public issue as was ladled out by partisans over the Hiss-Chambers case. It was, of course, tensely dramatic. Accuser and accused faced each other in the full glare of publicity. Both were men of considerable accomplishment, successful in their chosen fields. It appeared inevitable that one or both would be destroyed by the encounter. Moreover, the drama was heightened for many viewers by the awareness that, somehow, their own fates hung in the balance. There was a tendency to identify strongly with one or the other of the two men. Three years later feeling is still high, fanned, of course, by politicians for their own uses and by the imminence of the possibility of Hiss's parole. Because speculation continues, one examines with interest the book *Witness*, in which Whittaker Chambers gives his version of the epic in which he was an enigmatic participant.

Witness is written in a dramatic, rather portentous style, with spirit and with the attention to detail that characterizes the prose of a professional such as Chambers. It is many things: First, it is the personal history of its author, an effort to explain himself to what, at many times, must have seemed an almost entirely hostile world. Chambers, called "the one sainted person in the United States" by Arthur Koestler and branded a psychopath in court, self-confessed spy and ex-Communist, seemed to feel the very human need to make himself more understandable and, in some way, to allay the guilt which he points out most poignantly that an informer must feel. Second, it is an exposé of the operation of a fantastic group—or number of groups—of people dedicated to furthering the cause of communism as an eventual world order. Third, it is an excellent and quite sympathetic review of communist philosophy which makes clear where its appeal lies. Fourth, it is an account of Chambers' religious conversion. And fifth, of course, it is a story, from Chambers' point of view, of his relationship with Alger Hiss and the trial in which the relationship culminated. This book bears evidences of sincerity and truth which do not confirm the hypothesis that Chambers' accusations against Hiss were part of a vast psychopathic lie. It does not seem to be 800 pages of distortion and rationalization but a real attempt to gain understanding and sympathy by a sensitive person who writes about things that concern him intimately and about which he feels deeply. As such, we are left with the responsibility for considering it seriously.

This book is one more thing, however, besides those mentioned above. It is a political tract presenting a doctrine now current. This point of view appears to be the reason why Chambers is anathema to liberals. Chambers points out that a witness is not a witness against something but for something, and the thing for which he is testifying might be examined with profit.

If it is true, as some present-day theories would have it, that traumatic childhood experiences may distort adult personality, it is no wonder that Mr-Chambers did not develop along any humdrum and ordinary path. It would be hard to imagine a childhood or a youth more completely unsatisfying and frustrating than those depicted here. His search for acceptance and a meaningful way of structuring experience, first in the Communist party and later in Christianity, may mirror the consuming need of a rejected, rivalrous, and unloved son for security. Here was a man who needed to be moored by an anchor of absolutist religion to prevent dissolution of his personality. Just as it is not hard to see why a man with the unfortunate name of Jay Vivian should adopt other names in preference, so it is easy to see why a boy raised in such a chaotic environment might rebel against his family and extend the rebellion to the whole world as he knew it. The epitome of this was the New Year's Eve after his brother's suicide. On that night, perhaps in expiation of guilt toward his brother, he wrote a memorial poem as bypassing revelers gaily tossed an empty liquor bottle at the cemetery. That was the night, he said, which confirmed his communist resolve against the heedless masses.

The book does not make it appear that the nature and degree of Chambers' deviation from ordinary character structure add up to psychopathy. That was the common diagnosis of Drs. Binger and Murray in the second trial. But it is likely that—if diagnostic labels mean anything—they would now prefer to call his maladjustment neurosis, in the light of the evidence in his book, so much richer than the meager material available to them at the trial.

The relationship between Hiss and Chambers has been pictured as everything from an intense, reciprocally disturbed mutual attachment to a casual meeting between a kind but busy government official and a deadbeat free-lance writer whose ire he aroused so that vengeance was later sought and gained. Chambers' view as expressed in his book, is that, as Communists, they had "shared the same force of purpose" and worked for the same ends. He says of Hiss: "The outstanding fact about Alger Hiss was an unvarying mildness, a deep consideration and gracious patience that seemed proof against any of the ordinary exasperations of work and fatigue or the annoyances of family or personal relations" (p. 363). And, "No other Communist but Alger Hiss understood so quietly, or accepted with so little fuss or question the fact that the revolutionist cannot change the course of history without taking upon himself the crimes of history" (p. 361). He says also: "Alger was a little on the stuffy side. Ideas for their own sake did not interest him at all. His mind had come to rest in the doctrines of Marx and Lenin, and even then applied itself wholly to current politics and seldom, that I can remember, to history or to theory" (p. 360). Chambers does not have to struggle with the explanation of why a man such as Alger Hiss should have followed his faith to its ultimate conclusions. This arises in the nature of communism. "Communists," he says, "are that part of mankind which has recovered the power to live or die—to bear witness—for its faith. And it is a simple, rational faith that inspires men to live or die for it" (p. 9).

Alistair Cooke³ referred to the whole Hiss affair as "a generation on trial," as if there were something characteristic of the generation in the complex and miserable business. But Hiss's mother and brother killed themselves, and other relatives were markedly neurotic. Whittaker Chambers called his family a "middle-class family"—as if a clan with an insane grandmother, a deeply incompatible husband and wife emotionally distant throughout life and sometimes separated, and an alcoholic son, who finally succeeded after repeated attempts at suicide, were, in any way, the ordinary middle-class family. Whoever considered either of the antagonists typical of his generation selected an exceedingly small and inadequate sample.

The prosecution tried to make a *cause célèbre* out of the case, picturing Hiss as a Titan much closer to the authentic sources of power in America than he actually was. Defense counsel, for different reasons of their own, abetted this cause, and, as expected, the newspapers were not loathe to cooperate. In ancient times, armies would draw up opposite each other and send forth single champions, Sohrab, Rustam, David, or Goliath, to fight the enemy. Some present at the trial played up the battle between Hiss and Chambers as such a conflict between two champions of divergent principles. Historians inevitably will find this inaccurate. For although Chambers called Hiss "a man of great gentleness and simplicity of character," he was withdrawn, markedly introverted, and of definitely upper-class tastes. Chambers said of himself and his family, "We were gentle people and incapable of coping with the world." Neither of these intense individuals could be called a man of the people in any sense or a representative of our negligent culture. Certainly, for the vast majority of Americans in the generation of the 20's and 30's, espionage or betrayal of their country was so far from their thoughts as to be outlandish, of another world.

The psychiatric testimony of the experts called by the defense raised issues about civil rights as disturbing as the problem of multiple jeopardy involved in such trials. Hiss was one of the first victims of the "new look" in justice—admit your guilt before the investigating committee and the grand jury, and become a hero; deny it, and face a perjury trial because the statute of limitations has expired and you cannot be convicted for the act. He also suffered from the recently modish procedure suggested by the phrases "forgery by type-writer," "trial by newspaper," and "guilt by association."

But it was Chambers who became the victim of a moot point in the administration of justice, when, in the second trial, Judge Goddard permitted psychiatrists to testify as experts to discredit the creditability of his testimony. Although Chambers was not a party in the case and could get no redress, his personality was given a most unsympathetic airing in open court and the press. One wonders whether this precedent gives the witness much more protection than he would have before some of the more blatant congressional investigating circuses. Adding to the shakiness of the whole episode is the fact that psychiatry has not yet reached the advanced level of competence which would properly

³ Cooke, *A Generation on Trial* (1950).

permit its practitioners to claim expertness in the field of political affairs. Psychopathic personalities are not always liars, and the oversold field of psychiatry is not yet so advanced that its adherents can tell when Chambers' testimony was fact and when fable. Claims of ability to make such a distinction from observing the behavior in court of a person who has not even been interviewed or examined could scarcely increase public esteem for modern psychiatry.

The aspect of this book which most merits consideration is its expression of a present political philosophy, since it is one which is daily being implemented before our eyes. This doctrine is logically derived from a system of beliefs which in turn are based upon the life experiences of Whittaker Chambers, as any man's innermost beliefs must be. Below the conscious level upon which ideas are met and considered lies a substratum of feelings, forgotten or remembered experiences, and ultimate personal assumptions by which any idea of philosophy is judged. The logical structure of a man's ideation is flawed or flawless according to his own intellectual equipment and education. The substratum is non-logical. The forces which led Chambers first into the Communist party; then out of it, after quite belated awareness of "the screams of its victims"; then into an experience of conversion to Christianity, first as an Episcopalian and finally as a Quaker, are based upon his need to believe implicitly in a strong guiding force to give him security. As he had, at one time, maintained that all truth and right were bound up in communism, so now he believes that it embodies total evil. Only his present position is acceptable to God and suitable for a patriotic American.

On the political side, Chambers retains much of the indoctrination which he received as a Communist. He says: "The chief fruit of the First World War was the Russian Revolution and the rise of Communism as a national power. The chief fruit of the Second World War was our arrival at the next to the last step of the crisis with the rise of Communism as a world power. History is likely to say that these were the only decisive results of the world wars" (p. 7). Insofar as a man ventures to think or act politically, or even if he tries not to think or act at all, history will, nevertheless, define what he is in terms of two opposites—revolution and counter-revolution. Truth is dichotomous in nature. One is either for revolution or one is for God. Faith, not economics, is the central problem of this age. Communism, thus, is the great alternative faith of our time. Like Christ, it can say "he who is not with me is against me," because there are only two possible positions.

This point of view—expressed in Chambers' excellent wording—has a decided appeal. It is dangerous for that reason.

Chambers says he is not a conservative (although it would be hard to describe his position as anything else). Conservatives have little in common with counter-revolutionists, since they are suspicious of the necessary sacrifice and eager above all to conserve what they are and have. This is no way to fight revolution. Just as the Communists hate the position known as liberal, so

Chambers continues to hate that position. Now, however, instead of considering liberals weak and half-converted, he hates them as revolutionists, and: "For as between revolutionists who only half know what they are doing and revolutionists who know exactly what they are doing the latter are in a superb maneuvering position. At the basic point of the revolution—the shift of power from business to government—the two kinds of revolutionists were at one; and they shared many other views and hopes. . . . For men who could not see that what they firmly believed was liberalism added up to socialism could scarcely be expected to see what added up to Communism. . . . But as the struggle was really for revolutionary power, which in our age is always a struggle for control of the masses, that was the point at which they always betrayed their real character, for they reacted not like liberals but with the fierceness of revolutionists whenever that power was at issue" (pp. 472-73). Totalitarianism of any sort is also revolutionary, according to Chambers.

Since Chambers says repeatedly that his witness is *for* and not *against* something, a reviewer owes it to him to understand what he is for. Then one may, if he wishes, take issue with him. Chambers aligns himself solidly upon the side of God and finds a great peace in so doing. He is sure that freedom—that much misused word—can come only from obedience to the will of God. But what are God's—and Chambers'—politics? Who represents the forces of counter-revolution? "The plain men and women of the nation" whose support he felt during the long agony of the trial (p. 793). Chambers does not define further what his political beliefs are and yet, in a political book such as this, these generalities lead to difficulties—difficulties which are present, serious, and operating in our national life. It is likely that Chambers does not really know where the anti-revolutionists are found. To judge from those publications and people of whom he speaks with respect in the book, most of them are conservative, and one can gather that, since change in our governmental structure is synonymous with revolution, he is in favor of some form of classical capitalism (although there is much in historical capitalism that any reasonable God might be expected to deplore). His position basically, however, is anti-intellectual. He is not too specific about a positive program. And since he is still inclined to believe, as he did when he left the Communist party, that he has gone over to the losing side, he is animated by fear. This Christian appears to give to God only the final victory.

Our country and our world have been facing serious economic and social problems during our generation. We have witnessed the sagging of our economic system under multiple stresses. At times there has been need—an extreme need—to take emergency measures. We are living in an age of experimentation in economic and social forms. Yet one philosophy that Chambers does not consider, probably because he cannot, is a positive liberalism based upon a solid defense of the right of a man to think as he pleases, to study all points of view, and to advocate orderly change in his own government. A prevailing attitude of fear of mass infiltration and internal threat inevitably leads to defensiveness. No one is more terrified than the man who opposes a positive program with nothing to

offer but a set of feelings and attitudes. To such a man, the opposition—whoever it may be—feels so completely dangerous, so powerful, and so wrong that it is much more important to keep them out of power than to do anything at all positive. It becomes dangerous to believe or to advocate anything. Because the New Deal Democrats advocated change, Chambers oftentimes talks as if they were, in reality, Communists. But at what point do you fire a federal job-holder? When he advocates an extension of social security? (After all, this puts more power and money in the hands of government.) When he has been definitely proved to have conspired against the government? Or when he is known to have advocated unpopular points of view?

It is the psychology of fear and negative witness which leads to the spectacle of abuse of the congressional right to ascertain the true facts of situations; to the dangerous declaration of "guilt by association"; to extreme penalties upon known offenders; to voluntary rejection by some citizens of their own basic freedoms out of the need to limit others. When truth is looked upon as a dichotomy, it finally turns out that the two sides are nearly indistinguishable. Totalitarianism, which leads to the loss of constitutional guarantees, is as much totalitarianism if accepted voluntarily as if it is enforced by someone else. Chambers endured a public ordeal unusual in its violence and his emotions lead him at times nearly to believe that Alger Hiss's friends could have defended him only because they too were Communists. All liberals are therefore suspect on that ground as well as others. Alistair Cooke saw the possible results of the Hiss trial as an increase in the demand for conformity. He says: "The verdict galvanized the country into a bitter realization of the native American types who might well be dedicated to betrayal from within. It gave to ambitious politicians a license to use vigilance as a political weapon merely. It brought back into favor the odious trade of the public informer. . . . It tended to make conformity sheepish and to limit by intimidation what no Western society worth the name can safely limit: the curiosity and idealism of its young. It helped therefore to usher in a period when a high premium would be put on the chameleon and the politically neutral slob."⁴

Cooke's forecast is being proved true by history. The danger of Whittaker Chambers' *Witness* is that it is a negative witness, a witness of fear and reaction.

James G. Miller* and Jessie L. Miller.

⁴ *Ibid.*, at 340.

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The States and Subversion. Edited by Walter Gellhorn. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952. Pp. vii, 454. \$5.00.

This review is in good part the account of a misread passage:

It has been urged by thoughtful people that state and local security and loyalty programs are unnecessary and uniquely dangerous to civil liberty. This volume presents