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Two Good Reasons Why You Must Buy This Book

1. Because Bourke Cockran Was Crucial...

ANNE SEBBA

Becoming Winston Churchill, by Michael McMenamin and Curt Zoller. Greenwood, \$49.95, 274pp., hardbound. (No discount from CBC; available for as low as \$34.75 on Amazon.com.)

In 1895, a young lieutenant in a cavalry regiment of the British army persuaded his superiors to allow him to travel with a friend to Havana. The subaltern had been asked to collect military information on Spain's attempt to put down a Cuban revolution, and had made an arrangement with the *Daily Graphic* to publish his war letters, signed with his initials: WSC.

This escapade gave Jennie, the newly widowed officer's mother, who paid his fare, some mild embarrassment. What was a junior British officer doing with the staff of General Suarez Valdes, the Spanish commander? When interviewed by an American newspaper, she insisted that her son was not taking part in the campaign and that he was merely on a nine-week leave of absence.

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She refrained from saying that she had arranged it, that he had letters of introduction from the British War Office and Foreign Office to the Spanish authorities, which enabled him to go to the front and watch the operations.

But Jennie was pleased about the trip since it gave her the chance to introduce her son sooner to a good friend of hers in New York, where the boys were stopping en route to Havana. Winston, deeply impressionable, was bowled over and forever indebted to that friend, William Bourke Cockran, a charismatic and wealthy former congressman. He, in turn, went out of his way to help this unknown young Englishman, meeting him at the wharf, offering him hospitality at his Fifth Avenue apartment, and stimulating him with his talk. Winston wrote to his mother that Cockran was one of the most charming hosts and interesting men he had ever met. He told her about their deep and wide ranging discussions on every conceivable subject from economics to yacht racing.

Winston recognised that Cockran was not only a clever man, but one from whom much was to be learned. It was an introduction of magic. Winston listened to Bourke reading favourite speeches aloud, telling his protégé of the importance of timing, drama and sincerity; of giving people the simple truth with clarity and grandeur. They ate oysters and hominy together and afterwards the older man sent Winston some speeches for his comments and was "profoundly impressed" with his responses. Without a son himself, Cock-

ran treated Winston as his own at a critical time in the young man's life. By moulding him, encouraging him and recognising his potential, he became Winston's life-long inspiration, mentor and father figure.

Until now, Cockran, the man who helped shape Churchill's political and economic views on individualism and free trade, is almost a forgotten figure. Yet, as Michael McMenamin and Curt Zoller point out in this hugely readable study, some of Winston's most oft-quoted remarks were first uttered by Cockran, a man of unrivalled eloquence and enormous charm. The earth, he would say, "is a generous mother. She will produce in plentiful abundance food for all her children if they will but cultivate her soil in justice and peace." Winston once commented that he used to repeat that sentence so often on British platforms that eventually he had to give it a holiday.

Never, he said later, "was the choice between blessing and curse more vehemently presented to the human race."

Born in County Sligo in 1854, to a large family of some means, Bourke Cockran was a devout Catholic. After an education from the Christian Brothers in Ireland and then France, he had been destined for a life in the church. With his leonine head, large frame and even larger personality he was a man who could not be ignored. As an orator he was outstanding with a musical voice, clear diction, wide knowledge and the trained mind of an experienced lawyer and politician. So impressive was he that, according to one contemporary, "listening to him ... was like being transported to the Roman Senate in its

best days.” Others compared him to Edmund Burke, or to Charles James Fox, to whom he bore a strong resemblance.

Cockran came to America in 1871 aged seventeen, with £150 in his pocket. While supporting himself as a teacher of French, Latin and Greek, he studied for the bar and soon became prominent in politics as an important member of the Democratic Party and of the House of Representatives. When he met Jennie in 1895, thanks to an introduction from Moreton Frewen, he, like she, was recently widowed following the death of his second wife. He was also a successful lawyer with a flourishing practice and a man who had experienced life. When his first wife had died in childbirth one year after the marriage Bourke briefly became a heavy drinker. But then he stopped, never drank again, and “in that minute mastered the impulses of his own passionate nature—a nature outraged by misfortune, angry against the world.”

Though there is no proof, the authors believe (as does this writer) that Cockran and Jennie indulged in a tumultuous but short lived physical affair in Paris in the spring of 1895. But they parted friends, and the lasting result was Cockran’s influence on Winston, who returned to England not merely with coffee, cigars and guava jelly but

inspiration provided by the man who had also fired his mother’s dampened spirits. Winston maintained it was Cockran who taught him “to use every note of the human voice like an organ.” Even so, he always wished he had a voice like Cockran’s.

In 1906 Cockran married his third wife, Anne Ide, daughter of the American lawyer and Chief Justice of Samoa, Henry Clay Ide. Through Anne, Cockran acquired an additional relationship to the Churchill’s as his wife’s sister, Marjorie, married Shane Leslie.

It was through this connection, not the amatory one, that Cockran found himself at the bedside of Jennie Churchill in her dying days twenty-six years after they had met. As Jennie suddenly haemorrhaged following a fall, Marjorie produced a baby, Desmond, a nephew for Cockran’s and a cousin for Winston.

This book brings back into the foreground with power and imagination—fictional passages are interspersed with facts where information is thin—a spell-binding rabble-rouser, a man who deserves to be remembered as one whose principles, faith in democracy and oratorical skills were passed on to a young man at a critical point in his life, helping to create Winston Churchill, the leader who in turn inspired millions at a critical point in world history. ☞

his first visit to the United States. Their meeting grew into a real friendship between the two men based on trust, kindness, and mutual admiration. They would remain friends until Cockran’s death in 1923.

McMenamin and Zoller, of course, did not “discover” their subject, Cockran’s influence remained relatively unknown throughout Churchill’s lifetime—in spite of WSC’s best efforts. Many of the more touching passages in this book involves Churchill’s repeated efforts to credit Cockran as the primary influence on his oratory and thought. But Cockran had faded into obscurity by the time of the Second World War, few took Churchill’s claims seriously.

Cockran was first discussed seriously in the official biography that began in 1966; later books began to explore the man and his influence, and Martin Gilbert’s *Churchill in America* (2006) did critical work on this important man. Readers of *Finest Hour* have been seeing article-length studies of Cockran for quite a few years now.

McMenamin and Zoller, however, give us the first full scholarly study of Cockran’s life, discussing in detail his influence in shaping Churchill. They explore Cockran’s legal career and especially his role in the U.S. House of Representatives, demonstrating that time and time again (and like WSC) Cockran made difficult political choices that were morally just but that took a toll on his political career.

In spite of the fact that Cockran was continually in and out of office for most of his adult life (he was probably too scrupulous to be a career politician) he was generally considered the best public speaker in the nation. At the pinnacle of his career, in the 1880s and 1890s, he was likely one of the most famous people in the United States. To paint Cockran’s portrait anew, McMenamin and Zoller relied on the old-fashioned concept of hard work, logging time in archives like the New York Public Library and the Churchill Archives Centre. This is refreshing in the age of the “quickie” biography, where an entire book can be written using only the official biography and the document volumes as sources. >>

2. Because It’s Full of History and Wisdom

TED HUTCHINSON

There is some rare stuff between the covers of *Becoming Winston Churchill*: material so unusual, so uncommon, that Churchillians should treasure it like a rare gem, or a first edition of Mr. Brodrick’s Army. The book is perhaps even more uncommon than such rarities, because it exists in a world of fakes, largely populated by books which only pretend to do what it does.

Every year sees publication of

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more unnecessary books about some aspect of Churchill. Most simply retell familiar stories and recycle old quips. McMenamin and Zoller do something different—almost startlingly strange in the flood of mediocrity: They tell us something new.

Becoming Winston Churchill tells of the relationship between young Churchill and the only true male mentor he ever had, the Irish-American politician and lawyer Bourke Cockran. The story begins with Cockran and Churchill meeting in 1895 in New York City. When asked by Churchill’s mother Jennie, Cockran readily agreed to look out for the young man during

BECOMING WINSTON CHURCHILL...

The authors highlight three key areas where the Cockran's influence on Churchill was crucial. First, WSC was heavily influenced in his thinking on Free Trade, an idea that would be a cornerstone political concept of Churchill's for the rest of his life. Second, they record, Churchill borrowed many of his ideas on "liberty" from Cockran. While "liberty" is a word that defies easy definition, the authors feel that both Churchill and Cockran viewed "liberty" as freedom of the individual to rise and succeed in life. That is why, they explain, both Cockran and Churchill supported early concepts of the welfare state (as a tool that helped ensure the liberty of all citizens). Later, this grounding enabled Churchill to use the rhetoric of liberty when he stood to face Hitler in 1940.

But the most obvious influence Cockran had on Churchill was his speaking style. Churchill would mention this all his life, particularly after

the Second World War, when there was great interest in his oratory.

McMenamin and Zoller give many examples of this influence in the book, and Chapter 2 especially gives the reader a nice collection of speeches delivered by Churchill (particularly on Free Trade) that he essentially cribbed from Cockran. The dramatic effect of these side-by-side comparisons is considerable, and demonstrates both the influence Cockran had on WSC's thought and the careful consideration and labor that McMenamin and Zoller put into their book.

The one flaw I found was a stylistic choice which is little more than a matter of taste. The authors chose to begin each chapter with a "fictional narrative" written by McMenamin. The idea is to give a larger context to the story, and to pass along information not described in the actual material of the book. Most of the "fictional narratives" are based on fact, but in my view they distract the reader from material of great value that is found within.

Much of the fictional material is unnecessary and even silly; a typical but ridiculous quote goes: "Like many Irishmen, Cockran had two weaknesses: strong drink and beautiful women." (25) This sounds like something out of a bad detective novel, and undermines the very fine work done in the rest of the book. The authors should have trusted their voices as historians to tell the story, for when they do that they do an excellent job.

Still, this criticism is minor. This is an huge and even vital book for any Churchillian. It is important as a source of new material and new thinking about Churchill, and as a surprisingly tender and gentle way of thinking about young people. Every person, no matter how great, needs mentors, the author's argue—especially in their youth. By mentoring the young, older people can add critical dimensions of meaning to their lives. McMenamin and Zoller have proved it by helping to resurrect Bourke Cockran. Theirs is a message we should all take to heart. ☺

Two Good Books for the Optional List

TED HUTCHINSON

Troublesome Young Men: The Rebels Who Brought Churchill to Power in 1940 and Helped Save Britain, by Lynne Olson. Bloomsbury, 415 pp., \$27.50, member price \$22.

Former *Baltimore Sun* reporter Lynne Olson here tells the familiar tale of Britain's Parliament in the 1930s, and how a small group of conservative rebels broke from their party ranks and supported tougher measures than the government line to combat the rise of Adolf Hitler's Germany. Knowing their rebellion would almost certainly damage their political careers, these Conservatives acted according to conscience, and have thus won a place as "good guys" in the great morality tale

that is the rise and fall of Nazism.

Olson tells the story well. Her book is readable and moves briskly; even if there is little here that can be called new, she makes up for it by a compelling manner. While those well-versed in the story of Churchill and the era of the 1930s (including, of course, readers of *Finest Hour*) will find little that is fresh or profound here, this book can serve as both a serviceable introduction to the era and a useful collection of mini-biographies of important and interesting Tories.

It is with these mini-biographies, told within the context of the larger story, in which Olson really shines as a writer. Her portraits of deeply flawed but principled individuals are humane in the very best sense; without apologizing or explaining away their various traits and peccadilloes, she describes how each of the "troublesome young men" was shaped by and reacted to the world around them. Anthony Eden's natural cautiousness, Bob Boothby's

rough edges, Harold Macmillan's well-known difficulties are all dealt with in a sympathetic manner. I garnered some new insights into the lives of even the most well-known of them, like Macmillan, Eden, Harold Nicholson and Duff Cooper. I was pleased to learn more about lesser-known figures like Ronald Cartland, whom Olson highlights throughout the book. The author should be applauded for her insightful and humane examinations of these figures.

Troublesome Young Men benefits from the absence, until the last stages of the book, of Winston Churchill. True, Churchill is usually depicted at the center of most anti-appeasement activities in the 1930s. But Olson turns the spotlight away towards those who have been less vigorously studied. Most of them worked on their own, following their own consciences, and did not simply follow a "leader" like Churchill. Olson notes, correctly in fact, that at times Churchill could count on few

MPs other than Duncan Sandys and Brendan Bracken to follow his particular lead.

One of the obvious aspects of the book which deserves mention here, is the author's implicit comparisons between Neville Chamberlain, whom the "troublesome young men" rallied against, and current U.S. President George W. Bush:

Using tactics that have striking resonance today, Chamberlain and his subordinates restricted journalists' access to government sources, badgered the BBC and newspapers to follow the government line, and claimed that critics of their policies—in both the press and Parliament—were guilty of damaging the national interest.
(7)

Later, she quotes a contemporary MP: "You were either for the Government or against; there was no half-way house with him." (26) She concludes that "Chamberlain and his men came to regard any opposition as a lack of patriotism approaching treason, and they dealt with it accordingly... Eventually, [a *Daily Express* correspondent remarked], the government's intolerance developed 'undertones of totalitarianism.'" (159)

Readers may assess these observations themselves, but they lead Olson to conclude that "After Munich, Neville Chamberlain was spoiling for a fight—but not against Germany."
(156)

Chamberlain is the exception to my earlier comments about Olson's sympathy and humanity. He comes off as vain, conceited, arrogant, and quite willing to destroy the careers of honorable men who stood in his way. The fact remains, however, that Neville Chamberlain tried desperately to *avoid* war, whatever his ulterior motives for doing so might have been, which contrasts obviously with the current U.S. president, and thus damages the central metaphor of Olson's book. (See also Editor's Essay, page 6.)

In spite of the arrogance and incompetence of the Chamberlain government, and in spite of the quiet heroics of the anti-appeasers, who