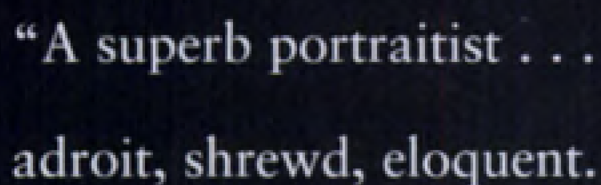

"A superb portraitist . . .
adroit, shrewd, eloquent.
It is difficult to think of any
other journalist who has this
combination of qualities
under such command."
—William F. Buckley Jr.

MEMORIES OF

THE GREAT & THE GOOD

ALISTAIR COOKE

Copyrighted material

ALISTAIR COOKE

MEMORIES OF THE GREAT & THE GOOD

ARCADE PUBLISHING • NEW YORK

Copyrighted material

Copyright © 1999 by Alistair Cooke

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

FIRST EDITION

ISBN 1-55970-479-9 (hc)
ISBN 1-55970-545-0 (pb)
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 99-73774
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication information is available.

Published in the United States by Arcade Publishing, Inc., New York
Distributed by Time Warner Trade Publishing

Visit our Web site at www.arcadepub.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Designed by API

FG

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Copyrighted material

CONTENTS

	To the Reader	ix
	Acknowledgments	xv
1	George Bernard Shaw	1
2	John Nance Garner: The Frontiersman	17
3	Frank Lloyd Wright	29
4	Wodehouse at Eighty	39
5	FDR	53
6	Maker of a President: Eleanor Roosevelt	69
7	General Marshall	75
8	Dean Acheson	89
9	Eisenhower at Gettysburg	101
10	Harold Ross	113

Copyrighted material

11	The Legend of Gary Cooper	123
12	Robert Frost	131
13	Goldwater: Jefferson in the Desert	143
14	Chichester: The Master Mariner	155
15	Reagan: The Common Man Writ Large	163
16	The Duke	175
17	Aiken of Vermont	187
18	Barbara McClintock: The Gene on the Cob	197
19	George Abbott	207
20	Scotty Reston: The Maestro from Glasgow	217
21	Erma Bombeck: A Rare Bird	229
22	The Last Victorian	239
23	The Gentleman from Georgia	259

Copyrighted material

TO THE READER

The great and the good" is a happy phrase that takes in a general appreciation of some people who are great at one thing and other people whose character is the fascinating thing about them.

The only other point to make about the definition is that a great man or woman is not necessarily a good man or woman. Napoleon was unquestionably a great man and in some conspicuous ways a human monster. There is no need to tease the distinction further for the purpose of this collection, which is to celebrate a variety of well-known people I have met, known, "covered," admired or liked throughout sixty-odd years of journalism. Most of these pieces tend to find, and rejoice in, what is best about their subjects.

Many years ago, I should say shortly after I left Cambridge at the age of twenty-three, I swore off what had been a great fashion among those of us with literary

Copyrighted material

ambitions: the belief, practiced to this day by the intellectual wolf pack of London, New York, and Rome, that the business of literary and historical criticism is the cutting down to size of the famous, of the eminent dead in particular. My temperament was unhappy with the clinical scrutiny of I. A. Richards, then the helmsman of the New Wave in English studies at Cambridge. Too often, it seemed to me, he was determined to discover in a literary work what was phony or meretricious rather than what was admirable. So, I suppose, I can be said to have lapsed into the tradition of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's "appreciative" criticism, which Dr. Richards and his pupil William Empson (the first deconstructionist) came along to ridicule and supplant.

There is another prejudice, or post-judice rather, that may have conditioned my choice of heroes and heroines. For many years, my reading has been mainly in biography and in American and British social and political history. And in the past quarter century or so, I have grown increasingly weary of psychobiographies and, even more, of pornobiographies. It is only very rarely (as, for instance, in the biographies of Presidents Cleveland and Clinton) that a person's sex life is crucial to his or her public reputation or performance. Otherwise, erotic probing is simply titillation and pruriency, two words that appear to have vanished from the language of criticism. Even some of the most distinguished biog-

Copyrighted material

raphers today seem plagued by the itch to pry into the sexuality, preferably kinky, of their characters. The plague has passed this book by.

What has made this collection a pleasure to put together is the fact of my having been for all my sixty-odd active years of journalism a foreign correspondent, and for thirty years or more having the privilege of roaming at will around every region of these United States. A foreign correspondent enjoys one or two advantages not given even to distinguished journalists who specialize in one field: labor relations, city hall, the Supreme Court, a sport, and so forth. First is the chance of acquiring what Theodore Roosevelt called "the sense of the continent." And the great reward of the foreign correspondent's trade springs precisely from that freedom to rove around a whole continent. It is the opportunity to meet all sorts and classes of humanity in their native habitat. Had I but life enough and time, I could fill another book with a Dickensian-size cast of memorable unknowns of the greatest variety, whose daily lives I came to look into. Casually now, and at random, I recall soldiers and sailors of every rank, small businessmen of great imagination and comicality, a minor gangster forging U.S. graded beef, a burlesque stripper, a Texas sheep sluicer, a modest, illiterate boy from the Carolinas with a genius for leadership in deadly situations in the Second World War.

Copyrighted material

Only when I had retired from wandering around America did I make the surprising discovery that the friends of my own friends, and of professional people in general, were invariably people who shared their political prejudices—a drastic method of cutting yourself off from enjoying at least half the human race!

The last two profiles, of Churchill and Bobby Jones, are set apart because I am more certain of them than of the rest (without offense of judgment) that one truly embodied greatness and the other goodness.

Some of these pieces, as the acknowledging note will testify, were originally daily dispatches to my only paper, the (then) *Manchester Guardian.* Five of them are the scripts of radio talks done over the BBC's World Service in my weekly series, "Letters from America." I had written so many thousands of words about President Franklin Roosevelt, from my first White House press conference in 1937 to his funeral at Hyde Park in 1945, that it seemed best to start again and write a new piece focused entirely on one aspect of him, and that the most vividly memorable to me. The same is true of Churchill. When the late William Shawn invited me to have my definitive say about the great man, I employed William Manchester's splendid biography to do so, and that piece, a little expanded, is included here much as it first appeared in *The New Yorker.* The Jones piece was

Copyrighted material

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"George Bernard Shaw," "FDR," and "Scotty Reston: The Maestro from Glasgow" were written for this volume.

"John Nance Garner: The Frontiersman," "General Marshall," and "Robert Frost" first aired as radio broadcasts in Alistair Cooke's "Letter from America" series for the BBC and were reprinted in his *Talk About America*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.

"Frank Lloyd Wright," "Maker of a President: Eleanor Roosevelt," and "The Legend of Gary Cooper" first appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*, and were reprinted in Alistair Cooke's *America Observed*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.

"Wodehouse at Eighty" first appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*, October 16, 1961, as did "Harold Ross," December 11, 1951; and "Reagan: The Common Man Writ Large," December 29, 1967.

"Dean Acheson" and "The Duke" first appeared in Alistair Cooke's *The Americans*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1971.

"Eisenhower at Gettysburg" first appeared in Alistair Cooke's *General Eisenhower on the Military Churchill: A Conversation with*

Copyrighted material

Alistair Cooke, published by W. W. Norton & Co., copyright © 1970 by James Nelson Productions.

"Goldwater: Jefferson in the Desert" first aired as a radio broadcast in Alistair Cooke's "Letter from America" series for the BBC on June 5, 1998; as did "Aiken of Vermont" on November 23, 1984; "Barbara McClintock: The Gene on the Cob" on October 21, 1983; "George Abbott" on February 4, 1995; and "Erma Bombeck: A Rare Bird" on April 26, 1996.

"Chichester: The Master Mariner" first appeared in Alistair Cooke's *Fun & Games*, published in the United Kingdom by Pavilion Books, 1994.

"The Last Victorian" first appeared in *The New Yorker*, August 22, 1983, and was revised for this volume.

"The Gentleman from Georgia" first appeared in Martin Davis's *The Greatest of Them All: The Legend of Bobby Jones*, published by The American Golfer, Inc., 1996, and was revised for this volume.

Copyrighted material

MEMORIES OF

THE GREAT & THE GOOD

Copyrighted material

1

George Bernard Shaw

(1999)

Copyrighted material

The Scene: A small conference room in Broadcasting House, the headquarters of the British Broadcasting Corporation, in London.

The Time: The spring of 1935.

The Cast: Sitting around a semicircular formation of long rectangular tables were half a dozen or more very eminent men, assuming postures of confidence and relaxation by which men of equal eminence signify that none of them needs to be impressed by the others. Smoking cigarettes, legs crossed or outstretched, exchanging small talk amiably on one elbow. Modest, not a show-off among them. All, apparently, waiting for the chief or the president, the chairman or whoever.

* * *

Copyrighted material

The roly-poly, merry, bespectacled William Temple, Archbishop of York; Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, a regal presence, the last survivor of the Victorian heyday, when an actor was recognizable at a hundred paces; the renowned biologist Julian Huxley, representing Science; Logan Pearsall Smith, a dapper old American expatriate, fashioner of exquisite prose, representing (I suppose) belles lettres, which in the early 1930s was still, in England at any rate, a going profession; and C. K. Ogden, representing—probably—Basic English, for it was unlikely that he had been chosen to serve as the author or explicator of "The Meaning of Meaning," a writhing thesis that nobody cared to have unraveled, not anyway at these meetings. I can't recall now who else was present to represent which of the other arts and sciences. But leaning over a sheaf of papers was a porcine, affable man with clean-shaven jowls. Not, in such company, an equally eminent man but in his own circle, which was that of linguists and phoneticians, a giant: A. Lloyd James, professor of phonetics at the University of London. He was here as the secretary of the board or committee. And what was I, an unknown beginning journalist in his mid-twenties, doing in this assembly of magnificoes? I was just back in England after a two-year stint of graduate work (and play) in the United States. The second year of my American fellowship had been spent at Harvard working under Professor Miles L. Hanley (an

Copyrighted material

American Henry Higgins at the time) on the history of *spoken* English in America, a fascinating field to all, it appeared, but Americans. Registered for this course were three of us, and of the other two one was an Englishwoman. So no assignment could have been more flattering to a novice in a new specialty than an invitation from Professor Lloyd James, who knew about my work, to join this committee as "the referent on American usage."

The committee bore the impressive, and to many people the mysterious, title of: The BBC's Advisory Committee on Spoken English. And before we cue the assembled cast into "action," it is necessary to say something about the founding of this exotic committee, for its title and purpose were popularly misunderstood from its inception. So much so that a useful and civilized institution was killed off within five years and never resurrected.

It had been set up with a single purpose: which was to establish, for the BBC's news and program announcers, a guide to the uniform pronunciation of names, place-names especially, and other words whose educated pronunciation were at the time arousing *con*troversy (or con*trov*ersy).

What made a large part of the population misunderstand the committee's function was the accent of the announcers. They were a special breed, recruited only

Copyrighted material

after a rigorous test which required them to speak, or at least pronounce, French, German and Italian according to Foreign Office standards. More to the point of the popular complaint, all of them in the London studios were hired because they spoke southern educated English, what was then known to phoneticians and language teachers as Received Standard. "Received by whom?" my headmaster used to intone in a mischievous singsong. With equal monotonous certainty, back came the answer: "The public schools, the Church, the army."

Since the BBC was something quite new to civilization: a radio broadcasting company and then the only one in the nation, it was obvious—if not imperative—that the BBC's spokesmen, the announcers, should not diffuse various forms of educated spoken English. Social democracy had not then invaded England and spread the alien notion that it might be natural for public speech to reflect the variety of regional speech, and that there was no longer any social compulsion to have the educated follow the upper-crust dialect that had evolved from the establishment in the mid-nineteenth century of that most peculiar institution, the English public (i.e. private) school.

But, as I say, the committee was concerned only with setting a uniform standard of pronunciation—of nouns mostly, proper and improper. The uniformity of the announcers' accent was taken for granted. However, they

Copyrighted material

an exotic figure indeed, not conceivably a product of the English public school system—a tall, upright, snapdragon old man in an old-fashioned four-button Norfolk tweed suit. He had a glittering eye, and he uttered a peremptory, musically inflected "Gentlemen, let us begin!" It was the chairman himself, George Bernard Shaw. A true British touch was added to this most English institution (not unlike the April-born queen celebrating her birthday in June) by the fact that Shaw himself, who as chairman—and in a tie vote, the supreme arbiter on correct pronunciation—spoke with an unmistakable Dublin brogue and maintained, in the teeth of legions of dissenters, that Dublin was the only place on earth where one could hear "pure spoken English," whatever that was. (This contention occasionally came up in our discussions of pronunciations, but since it was pointed out, usually by Prof. James, that we were confusing specific or particular pronunciations with questions of accent, the chairman would shrug his shoulders, make some final derisory comment in rich Dublinese and pass on.)

The meetings were never less than lively, a spirit practically guaranteed by Shaw's presence and his impish irascibility. (It strikes me, in my own senescence, that perhaps irascibility is a natural reflex of old age: Shaw was, at that first meeting, in his seventy-ninth year.)

Copyrighted material

The first time I was called on to offer an American alternative was when a clear variation was well-known. In the guide, which the BBC would publish later, the reader would find: "lieutenant—lefftenant (*Am.* lootenant)." The committee seemed to accept my function agreeably enough, though Logan Pearsall Smith, as an expatriate Anglophile, hinted from time to time that it would be better if American English did not exist, or at least were never mentioned.

There is a street in London called Conduit Street. The non-Londoners on the committee bowed to the true educated vernacular *Cun-dit,* and the ruling was about to be recorded when Lloyd James, in a spasm of mischief, wondered if Mr. Cooke might like to suggest an alternative American pronunciation. It would not be an exotic word to New Englanders, I said, but plainly an Indian word, cousin to Cotuit, Mass. If so, it would be pronounced Cun-*do*-it. General chuckle and on to business. Only the chairman thought that an American variant should be printed, on the understanding that when the next Irish variation came up, it should get the same treatment. We moved on.

The most memorable little battle happened at a meeting where the simple word "canine" came up for adjudication. Shaw asked each member to pronounce his preference. To a man, they came through: *can*-ine. In spite of the overwhelming preference, Shaw took a

Copyrighted material

vote and, announcing the result, added: "Somebody voted twice." Gentlemanly uproar. I pleaded guilty. "Because, sir," I said, "the American is unquestionably different: it's '*cane*-ine.'" To the disgust of the company, Shaw said firmly: "Quite right!" But, the committee protested, we are unanimous for *can*-ine. Shaw thereupon made a speech, the gist of which was: "I believe strongly in following the pronunciation of men who use the word every day in their profession, and my dentist says, '*cane*-ine.'"

"Then, sir," nipped in the witty Logan Pearsall Smith, "your dentist must be an American."

"Of course!" roared Shaw, "how d'you suppose I came to have all my teeth at my age?"

This retort, I recall, was greeted with a not wholly comprehending chuckle by the assembled Britons, who seemed vaguely unaware of the dim reputation of British dentistry. Shaw beamed on them with a well-satisfied grin, willingly registered the general preference (*can*-ine) but wagged a finger to remind them that he was insisting on "Mr. Cooke's adding in brackets: (*Am. cane*-ine)."

Once the last word had been questioned, argued over and ruled on, the chairman rose to attention, as he had been sitting at attention, and gave an offhand nod, the social equivalent of a thank you and good-bye, stepped down from the rostrum and was out the door. I never

Copyrighted material

remember his mixing with the members or attempting any small talk or socializing in any degree. This was true of the three or four meetings that were held in my time. After a while I could well understand what one or other of the group told me, that Shaw was a man with no friends. In his early, Fabian-campaigning days, he developed at most what you might call enthusiastic acquaintanceships with the other Socialist crusaders, but I can find little evidence, even from his biographer, Hesketh Pearson, that he kept or ever achieved any close friendships at all. Indeed, the notion of Shaw as "a man's man," a normal male with several cronies, is as bizarre as imagining his taking up golf or draw poker.

At one time, in late middle age—say well into his sixties—he socialized, always alone, to the extent of lunching with almost any celebrity who invited him. If they expected a cordial private exchange with a famous public character, they were uniformly disillusioned. The impressions of him from single encounters are strikingly similar. The benevolent P. G. Wodehouse, who liked everybody, was offended by Shaw's coming as a guest to lunch, imagining his host's lavish way of life and deploring it. At another luncheon party, Shaw dismayed the company by teasing H. G. Wells with a joke about his (Wells's) wife's newly diagnosed cancer. At a luncheon in honor of Bergson, Shaw told the guest, simmering with bottled rage, that his philosophy was not what he

Copyrighted material

thought it was. Arriving as a guest of Thomas Masaryk, the founding president of Czechoslovakia, Shaw described the foreign policy of the new country as a disaster and marched from the room. Winston Churchill was unusually laconic: "He was one of my earliest antipathies." James Agate, in the 1930s and 1940s England's most eminent dramatic critic, although he had made it plain in print that "Shaw's plays are the price we have to pay for his prefaces," yet thought Shaw to be the greatest living polemical writer and "a very great man." Agate was delirious when Shaw invited him to lunch with Mrs. Shaw and was prepared to sit and worship: "He sat upright in a chair which was frail, spindly and altogether beautiful like himself." Not only did Shaw talk continuously throughout the meal but Agate noticed "an odd habit" (which is surely disturbing to most listeners) "of not looking at you but gazing fixedly at a point somewhere over your shoulder."

When Shaw was the host, however, there is ample record that he could be droll and charming, once it was understood that the available food was to be the vegetarian platter prepared by Mrs. Shaw and that the guests had been invited to be present at a monologue. "Although," Bertrand Russell recalled, "like many witty men he considered wit an adequate substitute for wisdom, he could defend any idea, however silly, so cleverly as to make those who did not accept it look like fools."

Copyrighted material

This gentle, seemingly reasonable man would certainly hesitate to bruise a gnat but he professed to accept the necessity of liquidating (i.e. murdering) whole regions of peasants for the sake of a long-term political program. Yet the same man could feel excessive guilt for offending a nonentity: a young aspiring writer in the suburbs sent Shaw, evidently for comment, the manuscript of a children's book and its accompanying illustrations. Shaw lost the lot. He subsequently wrote a flock of apologetic letters to the forlorn young man, gave him a part in *The Doctor's Dilemma* and sent him a pair of new boots, a cardigan, an autographed copy of *Man and Superman*, a book on Karl Marx and, for no explained reason, the sum of fifteen pounds, ten shillings.

To the complaint of a London critic that a "wrinkled" Eleanora Duse was appearing in London in a role much too young for her, Shaw retorted: "Her wrinkles are the credentials of her humanity." After unloosing this lance of chivalry and good sense, he was then ready to release a fatuous manifesto proclaiming that vaccination killed more children than it protected.

But the central, and most bewildering, contradiction of his private and public character was that between his personal generosity, courtliness even to the humblest people (his optician remarked to a neighbor—"Oh, that Mr. Shaw! A nice old gentleman, never any trouble at all"), and his lifelong oscillation between maintain-

Copyrighted material

2

John Nance Garner: The Frontiersman

(1967)

Copyrighted material

On a warm April night in southern Florida, in 1951, two United States senators and a man from Missouri were asleep as holiday guests in the house of a wealthy American statesman, in Hobe Sound, an exclusive strip of land on the ocean, fenced in from the plebs by towering Australian pines and highly cultivated bits of real estate with an asking price of about a hundred thousand dollars* a lot.

Just as the dawn was coming up over the sea and the blue herons that stand motionless in the neighboring lagoons, a telephone startled this silent house and it was answered by the man from Missouri. He was struck dumb by what he heard and he pattered off in his pajamas to the next room and tapped on the door.

The man from Missouri simply said, "I just had it on

* *Today—1999—about $1.5 million.*

Copyrighted material

the phone from Washington—Harry Truman's fired MacArthur." The senator from Texas came upright, as on a hoist, and sat on the side of the bed and pondered the appalling news: that MacArthur, the hero of the Pacific war, the most Roman of all American generals, had been—as the order said—"stripped of all his commands."

The visible eyeball of the senator from Georgia rolled over the bedsheet and a high southern voice came out from under. "Hitch up yo' pants, Lyndon Johnson," it said, "and let's get the hell back to Washington and get that investigation started or they'll have a posse out for us before noon."

It was a sound instinct. Before the recriminations got started, the three men were back in the capital; and the senator from Georgia began the famous hearings that took many months and, I believe, three million words to affirm the judgment of the president of the United States and to confirm the original prejudices, one way or the other, of its people.

This anecdote is very typical of southern politicians, of their wariness, their healthy respect for the shifts and terrors of public sentiment, their relaxed assumption that pending Judgment Day something practical can be done about almost any catastrophe, from the loss of an election to an earthquake.

It came back to me the other evening when we

Copyrighted material

learned that down on the Mexican border, in Uvalde, Texas, a former vice president of the United States had died. He was John Nance Garner, called "Cactus Jack" after the burning and barren landscape that weaned him. Of all public men today he was the last link between the America of the Civil War and the America of the nuclear age. He would never himself have claimed the title of statesman, and, for that matter, he never earned it. "An elder statesman," he once told Harry Truman, "is a retired politician." He would not have claimed to understand or sympathize with the trouble in the cities, the missions to the moon, or the turn of American life much after 1934. Roosevelt's New Deal was the end of the road for him. And when, at the end of Roosevelt's second term, he stepped down from the vice presidency, he went home to Texas and swore he would never again cross the Potomac River. And he never did. He was cashiered, you might say, by his origins and his prejudices. The Depression overwhelmed him and many more of his breed who had been raised to believe that there was nothing an American couldn't face and overcome if he rolled his sleeves and gritted his teeth and sweated it out.

Today this bluster may sound quite fatuous. But it was a central conviction of the men who tamed the frontier, from the Cumberland Gap to the American River. And John Nance Garner was a fascinating faint echo of it. He

Copyrighted material

was remarkable not for any great gifts of mind or character but for his intense typicality of one aspect of the frontier character: its fatalism, physical hardiness, cynicism, tooth-sucking humor, its humdrum pragmatism in the face of death, disloyalty, and disaster. A Texas judge like Garner demonstrated to perfection the quality once ascribed to W. C. Fields: "He had the greatest reverence for his colleagues, with the usual reservations and suspicions." It is easy to imagine him, a little quiet stoat of a man, hearing the shocked cries of the onlookers at the severed head of an Indian and glancing down and snapping out, "A flesh wound."

Garner was the son of a Confederate cavalry trooper, and he was born in a muddy cabin, one room wide—what they called in the Red River Valley a shotgun house. Almost all the neighbors lived on farms. The black soil produced cotton and the red clay soil produced corn, and there were little sawmills in the clearings of the shortleaf pine. This was 1868, only three years after the war was over, but not before the Apache raids were over in his part of the country. His horizon was alive with flying squirrels and timber wolves, and his life was bounded by what the farmers called "work-a-crop" parties, by planting and plowing, box-and-pie suppers and fiddlers' contests on Saturday night; and on Sundays by camp meetings, and the whole neighborhood chanting:

Copyrighted material

the Davis Mountains; and she spoke with contempt of an expansive jolly man who came through in the 1870s, was full of praise for the bare landscape and said he meant to settle there for the reason that he liked the people and thought it was great farming country. Evidently, he had not shot or ravished anybody. "From then on," said the old crone, "he was a suspicious character."

There was a lot of preaching on the frontier, but it was reserved for Sunday meeting and left to one man, a professional. By weekday, you dealt with your fellow man, agile fly-by-nights, and rustlers and crooked lawyers and people who poisoned crops and dynamited wells. And from time to time there was an Indian raid. One of the first cases tried by the twenty-five-year-old Garner, when he was a county judge, was a gang of men who had been systematically cutting down pasture fences. Barbed wire was a comparative novelty, an omen of the coming of law and order; it fenced off the open range and said, This land is mine. Marauders who liked to make the most of the chaos of the range burned pastures, cut the wire, and left warnings to anyone who replaced it. Garner, in this case, bypassed the finer points of the law. He simply turned the Texas Rangers on them.

In his early twenties, by 1890, Garner had moved four hundred and fifty miles southwest, but still in Texas, to

Copyrighted material

No other president and his vice president have spanned such a gamut in their upbringing, social status and experience of American life. Garner, dirt-poor in barren Texas, had, as a child, known a woman who had been scalped. His early staple diet was fat-back pork and watered rot-gut whiskey. And yet the grandeur of the vice presidency was not worth "a spit in a pot."

Roosevelt was such a precious young scion of the Hudson Valley squirearchy that his mother shielded him for as long as possible from association with such rough-hewn types as Ivy League teenagers. But once in politics, this legendary dude of the establishment soon learned that most political decisions in a democracy turn on the judgment of men (mostly) born closer to Garner's America than to FDR's. Roosevelt always confided his more romantic political fantasies to the wary mind of the man from the goat country. And when he was assailed and ridiculed for his lapse into the naïveté of proposing to retire all the Supreme Court justices over seventy and supplant them with six (!) true New Deal objectivists, FDR asked Garner what was likely to happen.

"D'you want it," queried Garner, "with the bark on or off?"

"Off!"

"Captain, you're beat."

Copyrighted material

Until he was ninety, Garner attributed his great age to bourbon and water, and then, when he was ninety-nine, to "layin' off" bourbon and water. The other night he took a fever, went into a coma, and died, on the verge of his hundredth year. I was about to say there is nobody left who is like him. There is one man. Lyndon Johnson is like him.

Copyrighted material

3

Frank Lloyd Wright

(1959)

Copyrighted material

I met him first on a winter's afternoon in what I almost slipped into calling the vestry of his suite at the Plaza Hotel in New York. I pressed the electric button at first timorously, then boldly, then incessantly, and was about to turn away when the door was opened by a pretty young woman, a secretary, or granddaughter, or vestal virgin perhaps, who beckoned me into the hushed gloom behind her through which I expected to see sacramental tapers. Then she nodded and vanished down the corridor.

It is difficult to avoid these liturgical images in introducing him because his reputation, his public pronouncements, his photographs—the majestic head, the marble serenity, the Miltonic collars, the cape of Superman—all conspired to suggest a sort of exiled Buddha, a high priest scuttled from his temple by the barbarians, one of those deposed monarchs so frequently seen

Copyrighted material

around New York who gamely try to convey that a free-wheeling democracy is just their speed. The room he sat in was seedy, in a lavish Edwardian way, and no single furnishing—no chair, fabric, window casement, carpet, lintel, or doorknob—appeared to have been invented much later than the June of 1867 in which he was born. He lay stretched out on a sofa, his fine hands folded on his lap, a shawl precisely draped around his shoulders.

He looked like Merlin posing as Whistler's Mother. Indeed, there was always a curiously feminine grace about him, but it was nothing frail or skittish. He looked more like a matriarch of a pioneer family, one of those massive western gentlewomen who shipped the piano from Boston round the Horn, settled in the Sacramento Valley, defied the Argonauts as they set fire to the cattle barns, and, having finally reclaimed their Spanish land grants, came into their own again as the proud upholders of old manners against the derision and ribaldry of the new rich.

In writing about him as a character delineated by Henry James, or sentimentalized by Gertrude Atherton, I hope that I am not so much arranging a suitable atmosphere as conveying a psychological shock. One expected a tyrant, a man constantly caricatured by the press as a bellowing iconoclast. And here was a genial skeptic whose habitual tone was one of pianissimo raillery.

Copyrighted material

It may be that I knew him too late, when the fire and brimstone were all spent, when whatever lava had been in him in the turbulent days had cooled and hardened in the enormous, firm dewlaps that started at his nostrils and seemed to be tucked away not far above the clavicle. There must be some explanation for the discrepancy between the legend and the man. Perhaps his long decade of neglect in his sixties, when he had to borrow from friends to retrieve a mortgage on his own home, is as good as any.

At any rate, all my apprehension vanished as he threw me, from a seniority of forty-odd years, the flattery of calling me "young man" and asking what was on my mind. It was a project that was to waver and die and come alive again in his eventual appearance on a television program. He dismissed it at once as an absurdity, since it involved a medium only slightly less debased than the movies. I told him that no sponsors would interrupt his sermon, the models he used would be of his own choosing, he could say exactly what he pleased.

He wafted the whole vision aside as a bit of vulgarity for which he would not hold me responsible. Then he slipped, from total and inexplicable free association, into a diatribe against Franklin Roosevelt. In some dim but infuriating way, Roosevelt, it seemed, was responsible for the triumph of the rabble, for the "agony of our cities, for skyscrapers, for the United Nations building

Copyrighted material

("an anthill for a thousand ants"), for the whole mushroom fashion of what he called "Nuremberg Fascist Modern," and for the coming destruction of the Edwardian pile we were sitting in ("the only beautiful hotel," he said bafflingly, "in all of this god-awful New York"). About two hours later, by which time he had murmured most of the slogans from his latest book, he chuckled and said: "Tell me, Alistair boy, did you ever meet an executive, a president of a corporation, a button-pusher, who had a smitch of aesthetic in his makeup?" I said I never had.

"Very well, then, when do you want me to appear and where?"

We blocked out the feature and arranged rehearsals, and went around for weeks in euphoria, which was shattered when he passed down an ultimatum through an emissary: "No rehearsals! Rehearsals freeze the natural flow of the human personality." This sounds awful in print, but all such sententiae were delivered, either in person or over the phone, in the delicate and warmly modulated voice which had for fifty years seduced wax manufacturers, oil tycoons, bishops, university boards of trustees, and at least one emperor of Japan into commissioning cantilevered Aztec structures most of which were later rescinded, condemned as unsafe, or merely paid for and deplored.

On the day of the show, we asked to pick him up after

Copyrighted material

minutes later, he was back on the set, as malleable as an aging cat. The scripted outline was forgotten. We simply sat and talked, and to comatose or apoplectic millions he trotted out such unashamed ad libs as: "The interior decorator is simply an inferior desecrator of the work of an artist"; "we are all victims of the rectangle and the slab, we go on living in boxes of stone and brick, while the modern world is crying to be born in the discovery that concrete and steel can sleep together"; "we should learn from the snail—it has devised a home that is both exquisite and functional."

After this first bout with the most highly advertised ego of our time I ran into him in various places or was asked to call on him, and I probably presume in saying that my failure to discern any conceit in him but only a harmless vanity, penetrating observation, and always his beautifully cadenced good sense was due to one of those accidents of personal chemistry that seal confidence in an instant and dissolve mountains of fear or antagonism that can never be argued away by two uncongenial people.

The last time I saw him, a year ago, I was to "moderate" a debate in Chicago on the present condition of our cities. The panel consisted of real estate men, a housing commissioner, a young professor of architecture, and Wright. It was sponsored by a steel company that legitimately hoped to popularize "the steel cur-

Copyrighted material

fifty-four years since the first metal-bound plate-glass door, forty-eight years since the cantilevered floor, poured concrete, and all the other explosive solecisms that are now the grammar of the modern architect.

One imagines him arriving this weekend in Heaven, tapping his malacca cane against the pearly gates to test the strength of the carbonate of lime and greeting Saint Peter with the disarming tranquil gaze and the snowy head held high. He will ask to see the "many mansions I've been hearing about for nearly ninety years," and will be taken on an obsequious tour only to discover, without surprise and without regret, that there is a distressing reliance on Gothic; that there is nothing so bold as the cantilevered balcony over the waterfall in Bear Run, Pennsylvania; that nothing has been done to dampen with colored glass the enormous glare of the light that never was on land or sea. He will say as he turns away in boredom from his guide: "The principle of floating all these structures on a more or less stable mass of cumulus clouds is no newer than the cushion of mud I put under the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo in 1922, with the express purpose of withstanding (as it did) the wrath of God. I understand He has been sulking ever since."

Copyrighted material

4

Wodehouse at Eighty

(1961)

Copyrighted material

[The Nazi invasion of France in the spring of 1940 did not ignore Wodehouse's house in the South. To his immense surprise, he was arrested and taken to Silesia, where he was kept as a prisoner of war for eighteen months, unaware of the disasters inflicted on the Lowlands, on beaten France, not least on his countrymen and -women in the Battle of Britain.

Just as he was due to be released, as a sixty-year-old, he was invited to do some broadcasts to America (not yet in the war) over the Nazi radio in Berlin. A political innocent all his life, and never more so than now, he readily agreed as a way, he said, of repaying his American readers and friends for their books, letters, and general concern for him.

Today, the broadcast scripts read as lighthearted accounts of prison life in a German rural town at any time in the twentieth century. But read by victims of Nazi saturation bombing they were an outrage and caused a furor in Britain. There was serious discussion in the House of Commons of prosecuting

Copyrighted material

Wodehouse for treason after the war. The uproar eventually died down, but he never again went back to England.]

Long Island may fairly be seen as a fish nosing into the North American mainland at Manhattan. At the tail end, a hundred miles east into the Atlantic, there are two fins, widely separated, which enclose the large Peconic Bay. The north fin, called the North Fork, is inhabited by the survivors of original Colonial settlers and by the descendants of early twentieth century immigrant Poles, who are unpretentious, hardworking, pure and good. The south fin, or Shore, is inhabited by the rich, the bad and the beautiful, since the Second World War especially by affluent stock manipulators, television producers, interior decorators, actresses and their preying ten percenters.

It is an unlikely place to find the Master of Jeeves. But he lives a mile or two west of the bay, on the South Shore, in a rural haven quite isolated from the pervasive smell of success. Remsenburg was named for one Joris Remsen, a Dutchman owning three spacious tracts of land in New York City who, once the British had finally conquered and renamed the city of New Amsterdam, decamped from its alien rule and a small floodtide of arriving Englishmen. Remsen fled eighty miles east and set up a small, bosky village which down two centuries and more has become an oasis of well-spaced houses

Copyrighted material

and shade trees in the scrub-pine tundra on which the nouveau Long Islanders have built, at ten-foot intervals, their expensive variations of *ein bauhaus* by the sea.

Remsenburg is just about on the map and you have to watch out for narrow roads leading off the ocean highway and, after studying the instructions, pass a white wooden Colonial church and enter, at last, Basket Neck Lane.

It is an American lane, so there are no hedges, but the comfortable wooden houses lie back from the road on well-groomed lawns, and on the hot air of last Saturday afternoon a mower droned like a beehive. The houses have no names or numbers but only plaques propped against the entrance of the driveways. You go slowly down the lane and almost at its end see a privet hedge enclosing a wide lawn. This is the English touch. This must be it. Sure enough there is a small reflector sign against the hedge. It says "Wodehouse" and you lift your eyes from it and, as if this were the opening of a well-rehearsed television program, you "dolly up" to its owner, a big, pink, shambling, bald-headed man with thick glasses who is coming down the driveway and saying, "How nice of you to come, where shall we go? I think it might be cooler in the house."

He was right, for the Indian summer has burned like a crystal this last golden week or two, and so we went quickly over the lawn across a terrace, blinked at a circle

Copyrighted material

it's been forty-seven years") and a sweet-flowing stream of filthy lucre ("I get an awful lot of money out of Sweden, I can't think why").

"Now," he said again, as his pipe wheezed a reedy bass against the melodic tenor of his voice. "Tell me, this is awfully exciting news that the *Guardian* is printing in London. Do you think it was wise to drop the name 'Manchester,' I wonder?"

I claimed the Fifth Amendment on that one and maneuvered, with astonishing lack of success, to get him off my job onto his. He kept springing up and down, moving piles of English newspapers and magazines still unwrapped, and occasionally disciplining a snuffling boxer that had appeared from nowhere and started to lick my nostrils and ears. "Is she being a nuisance?" It was nothing really, I assured him, and came up for air before Debbie, an ill-named hound, started on my teeth.

After about twenty minutes of praising and deploring the English newspapers ("they have the best and worst"), it was time to be firm with Debbie and with Pelham Grenville Wodehouse. Debbie had been joined by a dachshund, and they were both removed, and he beamed again in utter benevolence. Not quite utter, perhaps, for his thick circular lenses give him the slightest look of Dr. Mabuse.

After Le Touquet ("the house was completely

Copyrighted material

smashed in the war") he lived in Paris for a while and in 1947 came back to America. In 1952 he and his wife were staying with his oldest friend and collaborator, Guy Bolton, "down here, and my wife came in from this awful jungle and she'd bought a house. It was a shack, but you see we fixed it up and built on to it, and reclaimed twelve acres from this scrub, and I don't think I shall ever leave Remsenburg." He is eighty on Sunday, and I smiled a salute at the gallantry of the word "ever."

I supposed that he had a host, at least a clutch, of close friends around. "No, no," he fluted, as if he was lucky to be so free of claims, "only Guy Bolton. You don't really need more than one, do you?" It was evidently enough for him. "Of course, I wave to the neighbors. They are very friendly and all that. But no friends, we never go to parties or travel anymore." He sounded like a TV announcer describing the halcyon life for a Florida insurance company.

When had he last been in England?

"I went over in nineteen-thirty-nine to see a cricket match. It was between Dulwich and St. Paul's. It was very dull. T. Bailey played a dreadful innings. They tell me England has changed in many ways, but nobody can agree on what ways."

We were headed for another pleasant detour so I brought him back on the main road with perhaps a brutal bang.

Copyrighted material

We started up again almost as if lunch or some other domestic entrant had intervened. I wanted to ask him about his daily routine, and the writing he was doing, but there was the awkward possibility that he might be doing very little and be too proud to say so, and I might clumsily invite him to admit that his day was done and his market gone with the wind, the Second War and the Welfare State. So I mentioned the "new book" *The Ice in the Bedroom* and the literary study of him *(Wodehouse at Work)* just coming out by a certain learned Usborne.

"Oh," he said, "the novel came out here last year. But the other book is a rather frightening thing, you know. I mean, I'm sure it's very conscientious and impressive to have someone go into one's stuff like that, but it's rather unsettling. I mean, you turn the stuff out and then public orators begin to declaim and critics analyze it . . . well, it's rather uncomfortable." He writhed with unaffected conviction.

"Do you find"—this was the sneaky foot in the door—"that people still *want* the stuff turned out? I understand you're translated all over."

"Well," he said, waving his pipe and stressing every other adjective, "it's the most *remarkable* thing. I don't believe there is a *single* language—wait now, I am not sure about the Russians—that hasn't translated it. I get books in Burmese and Korean and Japanese, and I can't think what they are. You have to trace them like hiero-

Copyrighted material

glyphs and read them backwards. And all the time, you wrote them. It's *most* amazing. I can't think what *they* think they're reading!"

His bewilderment seemed completely genuine, and through all our talk there was the novel feeling that here was a hermit, a recluse, a sort of musical comedy Schweitzer, who had honestly no idea that he'd ever been heard of, or read outside the dormitories of English public schools when the lights were out. The calls from American magazines and agents (it was coming out now) of course were understandable. "They go on and on. I just had a call from an agent who wants me to make a musical comedy out of Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton.* And then they're well along with a series of television shows about Jeeves. But I don't understand the other countries. The Communists, for instance. There was a ban on me in Hungary for a while, which is just as mysterious as their reading me at all. But they do. The Czechs and the Poles and the rest. Perhaps they think of me as a satirist."

He chuckled over this and added in a confessional tone. "Of course, I've always gone rather on the assumption that country houses and butlers have never passed away."

I thought of Margaret Fuller accepting the universe and said mildly, "You'd better. After all, it's your staple."

"Of course it is," he cried, grateful for the *mot juste.*

Copyrighted material

"It's my staple. I don't pretend these things exist. They probably never have existed. They're really historical novels. I suppose there are no Bertie Woosters, at least, anymore. If there are, I imagine they're on the make. You see, I do feel we have lost something, even in the crooks and bounders. The Woosters were really innocent people. That's what we've lost—innocence."

This led by an obvious but gloomy association to the modern comedians and humorists. In the only downright sentence he ever spoke, he said he disliked the "sick" comedian. He writhed a little and found a better word.

"Geniality," he said, "I think that's what I miss in the new comics and the humorists."

I wondered who the new humorists were, and he wondered too. "Really, when you come to think of it, I can't think of any young ones coming along except Jean Kerr. When I first came to this country, everybody was funny, the writers, the vaudeville comics, the iceman, the neighbors. . . ."

Couldn't this have been the delight of a first exposure to the oblique turn of American minds?

"Maybe, maybe," he said, making another tremendous discovery. "But there are no more Benchleys and Thurbers, and George Ades or S. J. Perelmans, or in England any more W. W. Jacobs and Barry Paines. And Nunnally Johnson, now there was a fine humorist." He

Copyrighted material

Communists, who must at this moment be learning the dreadful truth about the West by commuting between *Leave It to Psmith* and *Little Dorrit* in order to strike the proper balance between the life of the oppressors in their castles and the oppressed in their factories. He thought it very likely.

The dogs bounded in again and converged on my French poodle, which had broken out of the car. There was an ugly snarl and yelp or two, and the talk was plainly at an end. "Debbie, Debbie," he said, almost weeping with affection over this slobbering monster of a boxer. "Gently, gently." He picked her up and saw me across the lawn and down the driveway. With the free hand he waved, as to a neighbor, and padded out of the burning sun and back into the shade of the house and the real world of Psmith and Jeeves and Lord Emsworth and Mr. Mulliner and Bertie Wooster, who don't exist any more except in the puzzled but fascinated imaginations of about eighty or ninety nations.

Copyrighted material

5

FDR

(1999)

Copyrighted material

My first memory of President Roosevelt in the flesh was at the three hundredth anniversary of the founding of Harvard College, a weeklong celebration in September 1936. Roosevelt was to be the main speaker in the closing ceremony. But the whole affair was such a dazzling circus of exhibitions (manuscripts, antiquities), symphony concerts, torchlight parades, fireworks—all staged for the first and surely last convention of world scholarship—that it was enough to obliterate in retrospect the sharp memory of all the participants—all except one. It was my first reporting assignment for a newspaper, for anybody, and it was a daunting initiation.

Over seven hundred eminent scholars from forty-two foreign universities had been invited on terms that can be said to be uniquely demanding if not outrageously rude: that they should turn in to the president of Harvard the results of original—and hitherto unpub-

Copyrighted material

lished—research carried out during the previous two years. Most of these papers were so specialized, so beyond the intellectual range of the reporters present, that we simply had to note and take on trust the vital importance of Professor Millikan's cosmic ray researches, the excursions of Sir Arthur Eddington into the interior of the stars, Dr. Howard Northrop's meditations on the formation of enzymes. The uncomprehending majority of reporters present were left to grab a one-day sensation out of the discovery of Dr. Friedrich Bergius of Heidelberg of how to convert wood into carbohydrates. It offered a startling piece on the grim prospect of a besieged nation at war being adequately fed on sawdust.

When the final day came, the delegates discovered that President Conant was about to confront them with something not at all entertaining and far more challenging than anything they had seen all week (perhaps, for some of them, all their lifetime). It was to hear four famous men, two from democracies, two from totalitarian regimes, express themselves on an idea: the idea of Freedom.

The most eminent living anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, was the first to speak for our side: "Our present civilization is passing through a very severe, perhaps a crucial, stage of maladjustment. The abuse of legal and administrative power; the inability to create lasting conditions of peace; the recrudescence of ag-

Copyrighted material

gressive militarism" (no mention of passive militarism!); "the torpor of true religion and the assumption of religious garb by doctrines of racial or national superiority or the gospel of Marx . . . it is our duty to insist on the necessity for freedom." This was all impressively high-toned but once the echoes of its eloquence had faded, much of it was seen to be begging the question. "The inability to create lasting conditions of peace" is not a twentieth-century failing: it was demonstrated so long ago as 1307 by the brave Pierre Dubois, legal adviser to the king of France, and the organizer of the first league of nations. And to whom shall we present our "insistence" on "the necessity of freedom"? Adolf Hitler? Neville Chamberlain?

In response came two scholars of world renown, from Rome and Tokyo. Dr. Corrado Gini, professor of sociology at the University of Rome, didn't even begin to dispute "the necessity for freedom"; plainly, to him, it was a naive delusion of people who had no historical perspective. To every nation, he granted, "there must be an appropriate" alternation of "tension and relaxation of authority." While admitting the "wisdom" of some liberal eras, he yet believed that "Italy today requires a Fascism." So there!

There was even less hope of a workable formula for compromise between tense and relaxed authority from the great Masaharu Anesaki, professor of religion in the

Copyrighted material

That left, however, fifty percent who never went to Harvard, townspeople who had spent weeks scrambling for a ticket to the Yard and this famous occasion. They were beginning to thrash their arms against the cold and crane their heads to catch the first glimpse of the star turn, when the gray sky blackened and a sudden billow of wind from the east brought on a torrent of rain and drove everybody indoors. Not quite everybody. Probably less than a third of the expectant crowd could jam into the Sanders Theatre, and it took time till they were packed to the windowsills. The thousands who couldn't make it stayed huddled outdoors, their drenched ears cocked for the hero. Inside, at last, the old ex-president Lowell fairly bellowed into the microphone: "Gentlemen, the president of the United States!" There were many old Harvard men quite prepared to boo or hiss. They were sufficiently well-bred, however, to sit on their hands. But no dissenting gesture short of a gunshot could have arrested the roar that for five clocked minutes rocked the theater and thundered out of the loudspeakers of a continent.

Through this sustained din, he came on slowly as the platform guests parted for him: leaning on an arm, the other hand clutching a cane, walking very slowly and straight-legged. "Seems," remarked one young student without guile or second thought, "to have trouble walking."

Copyrighted material

It was an artless remark but it was a taproot for me into the one visual memory of that day that remains indelible. For I have to confess that all the foregoing reportage and Roosevelt's lilting but unremarkable speech hoping "Harvard and America" would "stand for the freedom of the human mind" spring not from my memory but from a rescued photostat of my dispatch (September 20, 1936) to the London *Observer.*

Well before the final ceremony I had gone to the Yard expecting to flash my press credentials and be led down to the press rows by some marshal or usherette. But the main entrance was jammed with a dense, jostling crowd. I knew the Yard well (I had been at Harvard, after all, for a whole year) and I remembered a side entrance round a long curving wall. It was there all right, an open iron gate leading into a small yard not much larger than a capacious alley. Opposite the entrance gate was a door, which led through to the Yard. But I had barely walked into the alley when there was the sudden swishing of a large automobile, a squawk of brakes and a rapid patter of footsteps running toward me. They belonged to a young bareheaded man in a suit who had one hand stuck in his right coat pocket. He was what I was to come to know well: a Secret Service man. He stopped me, pushed me, gently I must say, against a side wall and wondered what I was doing there. I showed him my credentials and was plainly so scared and inno-

Copyrighted material

the name—the president of the United States! The second, that he was a cripple. The president of the United States was a paraplegic!! It is something everybody in the world knows now though our not knowing it is disbelieved by succeeding generations who have seen the Roosevelt family's home movies and documentaries based on, no less, the whole history of his affliction. Yet if, at almost any time during the twelve years of Roosevelt's presidency, you had put the bare question ("Did you know that the president is a cripple?") I'm pretty sure that most of the population would have said something like, "I heard he had poliomyelitis at one time." But since the first fatal attack in 1921, he was never filmed for movie theater newsreels (there was, of course, no television throughout his lifetime) or ever photographed by news reporters in his wheelchair. This taboo was observed for twenty-five years—even by the press chains, like Hearst's, that hated him—throughout his governorship of New York State and throughout the four terms of his presidency. It is, I should think, a unique example of voluntary restraint. The result of it was to confirm triumphantly the psychologist's old discovery that the thing *seen* very soon obliterates the thing heard or read. That explained why the vast majority of the American population never thought of Roosevelt as a cripple. What, for a quarter century, was impressed on everyone's senses was the powerful upper body, the bull

Copyrighted material

neck, the strong hands clasping the lectern, the handsome head tossing the spoken emphases, the happy squire waving to everybody from an open car, the perpetual optimist and Savior of America in the darkest days. So, though most people could accept the reminder, if ever it came up, that the president was paralyzed, it was a truth buried deep at the back of the mind.

As for the taboo that kept it there, a taboo that was faithfully observed by the national press for over twelve years, it is inconceivable that today it would be maintained for a week or a day. Some British tabloid would be sure to offer a fortune to the first to break it.

The sharpness of this memory obviously prejudiced me in his favor when, in the spring of 1937, I came as a news correspondent to Washington fresh from England, to report on the man who by then was a beacon to the peoples of the European countries that had not lost their liberties to Hitler on the rampage or foaming Mussolini or the man of steel (Stalin) in the Kremlin. In England, which I knew best, the old still lived with the memories of the enormous slaughter on the Western Front, and the young found little inspiration in a Tory government on the defensive moving backward, one step at a time, before Hitler's oncoming shadow. To many of the idealistic young, though, there was a rousing alternative to stomping Fascism and defensive Toryism. The public

Copyrighted material

face of Communism in the Soviet Union had been so brightly painted by an older generation of early believers—Shaw and Lady Astor and the Webbs among them—and the private terror by which the system worked was so well disguised or disbelieved that "to each according to his needs, from each according to his ability" seems a positively Christian doctrine.

But for the undifferentiated mass of still-free, self-governing Europeans, there was yet another exhilarating choice, and, across the Atlantic, Franklin Roosevelt was the heroic cast of it. To a Europe bereft of notable leaders who were not tyrants, here was a man who, defying the current totalitarian models and denouncing them, was reinvigorating the largest democracy by democratic means and with the enthusiastic consent of the mass of his people. What Europeans didn't know, or didn't care, was that Roosevelt had been able to exert a power usually prohibited by law to leaders in a democracy. He had demanded in his first inaugural speech powers beyond the restraints of the Constitution "if the normal balance of Executive and Legislative authority" did not prove "wholly adequate"; then "I shall ask the Congress for broad Executive power . . . as great as the power that would be given me if we were, in fact, invaded by a foreign foe." As he spoke those alarming words, he was already exercising extraordinary executive power: he had closed all the nation's banks, and *he* would decide which

Copyrighted material

dependable, coalition of the unlikeliest allies. This ever-smiling, confident patrician—the very patent of good breeding and a gentlemanly conscience—never had a second's hesitation in making up to anyone he needed: rough labor leaders here, wily southern conservative senators there, the dictator of Louisiana, the men who ran corrupt city governments (in Chicago, Memphis, Jersey City). They were powerful and they could deliver the Democratic vote.

Many times in press conferences, and on the last two presidential campaigns, I came to marvel at the ease, the beautifully played cool, of his behavior to us, the press, the morning after a congressional defeat, a jolt from the Supreme Court. The secret spring of this ease and seeming indifference to the mounting criticism of the press and the hatred of him by the Republicans was his deep, undisturbable sense of what the mass of the people wanted. Not, as in Winston Churchill's liberal period, when he was appalled at poverty and wanted to return the poor to the decent estate to which God had ordered them. Roosevelt truly felt from the first to the last days in the White House that, after the degrading plunge into the Depression, everybody wanted not a return to the status quo ante but a better life altogether. He was so sure of the rightness of this instinct that he could toss off a defeat like a common cold. He had a new idea every day. As a testy columnist put it: "He

Copyrighted material

started giving people federal money . . . to dig a ditch across Florida and build a dam to harness the tides of Fundy. The ditch and dam seemed not so good once they were under way; so, all right, skip them, and how about a new kind of Supreme Court?" This same columnist, an artful juggler with the English language, one Westbrook Pegler, paid Roosevelt the ultimate compliment, all the truer for coming from a man who for all of FDR's later years harbored an almost pathological hatred of him: "Never in our time have people been so conscious of the meanness which a complacent upper class will practice on the help, and of the government's duty to do something real and personal for the assistance of those who are so far down that they can't help themselves. . . . He needs to be fought all the time . . . but if the country doesn't go absolutely broke in his time, it will be a more intelligent and a better country after him."

Not long after I settled in here as a foreign correspondent, I came, like the Americans I lived and mingled with, to forget all about Roosevelt's affliction. Only from time to time did the memory float up as a question: by what miraculous inner drive could this cripple undertake the prodigious business of pulling American up by its shoddy shoes from the depths of despair and misery? (I had seen lots of both in two long drives across the country in 1933 and 1934, and was constantly

Copyrighted material

6

Maker of a President: Eleanor Roosevelt

(1962)

Copyrighted material

Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, the widow of the thirty-second president of the United States, died last week in New York City where she was born seventy-eight years ago. Except for increasing deafness in old age, she had never been troubled with anything much more bothersome than a cold or a broken ankle until she took to a hospital bed a few weeks ago with a pestiferous condition that was eventually diagnosed as anemia complicated by a lung infection. "Eleanor," Franklin Roosevelt used to say, watching her and her notebook whirl continuously around the United States to check on soil erosion, unemployment, sick leave among nurses, or silicosis among miners, "has time for everybody's troubles but her own."

It was a proud complaint which, in the missionary days of the New Deal, the newspaper cartoonists turned into a national joke. Until Mrs. Roosevelt, First Ladies

Copyrighted material

were supposed to be the most gracious furnishing of the White House. They kept the silver polished and the fires burning against the unpredictable return of the great man from the crushing appointments of his office. It is a tradition honored up to 1933 and since 1945. The twelve intervening years turned the White House into a sort of national hotel operation under emergency conditions. Protocol was packed off with the bags of Mr. and Mrs. Hoover. The president's bedroom was invaded at breakfast by the Brain Trust. Lunch was a sandwich on a tray dispensed to visiting governors, labor leaders, national committeemen. Birthdays, national holidays, and most Sunday evenings were the occasion of the famous and inedible Roosevelt buffets.

This genial chaos was the logical extension, on a national scale, of the domestic free-for-all which Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt had developed at Hyde Park and Campobello, and at their house in New York, as the boisterous childhood of five children coincided with the effort of Mrs. Roosevelt and Louis Howe to boost her paralyzed husband into national politics and to save him from the fate which his mother prescribed with such grim resolve: "My son must come home to live in Hyde Park: he's going to be an invalid the rest of his life and he needs rest and complete quiet."

Even now, forty-one years after the famous chill at Campobello and the black two years during which Roo-

Copyrighted material

sevelt agonized over the hardest task of a lifetime ("trying to move one toe"), the transformation of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt from an upper-class couple of no particular personal distinction into two iron characters who have left their permanent brand on history appears to be nothing less than a human miracle.

Eleanor's childhood and youth seemed a pathetic prelude to a life of social martyrdom. Her father was a gallant drunk, her mother the spoiled and beautiful daughter of a beauty more petulant still. She was a nuisance and butt. From earliest girlhood her mother mocked her for her gravity, her prominent teeth and shapeless mouth. She comforted herself in her journal with the thought that "no matter how plain we may be, if we have virtue and trust, they will show in our faces." She went to work in a settlement house and came to know the daily aspect of poverty, a running sore on the body politic that astonished and embarrassed Franklin.

Then came New York State politics in Albany, and the dreadful summer, and the dedicated battle with his mother, and soon his discovery that if he listened more and tossed his head less, he could like people and they could like him. Eleanor took night classes in government and sociology and fed her lessons to Franklin, while Louis Howe massaged his legs for hours on end. It is the symbolic picture of the rest of their lives. In the White House, when the steel braces grew too heavy, he

Copyrighted material

took them off and Eleanor, fresh from the Midwest or the Deep South, read over the compassionate statistics she learned on the road with such unflagging and humorless devotion.

"The concept of duty," writes her biographer, "was Victorian, soft-headed, and entirely un-American, in the brassy 1920s. But Eleanor Roosevelt had it and it guided her entire existence." It transmuted an ugly duckling school-ma'am into a great woman, and it planed away the emotional fat in a feckless, generous man, knotted his fiber, and produced a great president. There are few women in the history of great nations who could claim such a personal achievement, and none less likely to make the claim. The people, though, sensed it and year after year, to the annoyance of her chuckling detractors, she was voted, in a national poll, the First Lady of the World.

For herself she simply listed in the *Who's Who* entry only three or four offices she filled on her own account. She might have recorded the sum of her great life with nothing more than her vital statistics and the single entry: "Created the thirty-second president of the United States."

Copyrighted material

ARCADE
PUBLISHING
NEW YORK

FPT $13.95

"Sparkles with enviable turns of phrase and Cooke's keen perceptions of personality." —*Atlanta Journal Constitution*

"Cooke's colorful, appreciative portraits prove that one doesn't have to be disrespectful or prurient in order to make a vivid impression." —*Christian Science Monitor*

"The Churchill piece seems to me both brilliant and absolutely true . . . a masterpiece." —Isaiah Berlin

Over the course of his career as a foreign correspondent, Alistair Cooke has known, interviewed, or reported on hundreds of the most influential men and women of the twentieth century. Here he has collected his memories of more than a score of them, men and women who he feels have left the world a better or more interesting place.

Here are scintillating portraits of characters as diverse as George Bernard Shaw and Duke Ellington, as different as Erma Bombeck and Barbara McClintock. His account of a weekend with President Dwight Eisenhower is sensitive and revealing, as is his portrait of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His meeting with Ronald Reagan, when Reagan was governor of California, is wonderfully prescient. The book ends with portraits of two men Cooke especially admires: Winston Churchill, who for all his human flaws was "most certainly great," and golfing legend Bobby Jones, whom Cooke regards as "one of the three or four finest human beings I have ever known."

Alistair Cooke was born in Manchester, England. Since moving to New York in 1937, he has written on every facet of American life. His many books include the bestseller *Alistair Cooke's America*. He became known to millions of Americans as host of the television programs *Omnibus* and *Masterpiece Theatre*. His weekly BBC radio broadcast, *Letter from America*, now in its fifty-fifth year, is heard in fifty-two countries around the world.

Cover design by Abby Kagan
Front cover photograph courtesy of WGBH Boston

Distributed by Time Warner Trade Publishing

Visit our Web site at www.arcadepub.com

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

10001370

Copyrighted material