

## The Banality of Banal

by Clyde Wilson

**A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950**  
by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.  
Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin,  
557 pp., \$28.95



I first thought I would title this review “Memoirs of the Imperial Jester.” The jester being one who, though of no importance himself, is always present at the imperial court, I thought I discerned certain parallels between him and the author of *A Life in the Twentieth Century*. After looking into its pages, however, I saw that I was wrong. A jester should occasionally be amusing, show some shrewd insight, and exercise his special license for candor.

Inevitably, Schlesinger’s memoirs get the big publisher and the big hype. Mr. Schlesinger is “the finest historian of our age,” according to such dust-jacket celebrities as the erudite Mr. Tom Brokaw and the judicious Mr. Norman Mailer. (How would they know?) The same authorities tell us that this fat book, which takes Arthur Junior up to age 33, is “an eloquent and insightful history of the 20th century” and also “a fabulous journey through the first half of the 20th century.” The fact is, Schlesinger is not and never has been an historian but merely a writer of clever political tracts, a press agent for the left wing of the Democratic party (now the *only* wing). In *The Age of Jackson* (his Harvard M.A. thesis), with no fear despite insufficient research, he gave us a supposedly definitive interpretation of the most complicated period of U.S. history. In contrast to all previous (and subsequent) understandings of serious historians, Jacksonian democracy, it appeared, was centered in Boston and New York and uncannily resembled the New Deal coalition of progressive intellectuals and labor radicals.

Schlesinger’s blow-by-blow and rather

gee-whizzy account of the process of creation herein confirms my longstanding suspicions. The case in *The Age of Jackson* was made by slim research, artful elaboration of out-of-context quotations, the brushing aside of contrary evidence, and the establishment of plausible but nonexistent connections between various movements. A serious historian would have put forth Schlesinger’s interpretation of the period in a tentative essay to be explored and tested; years of serious research and thought would occupy him before setting forth so sweeping an historical interpretation. As penman for the imperial state, Schlesinger chose to operate differently, and was well rewarded for it. (It is a curious phenomenon that academic historians as a group, while paying lip service to professional standards, give their admiration to the writers who rise above professional standards to achieve celebrity.)

Schlesinger *qua* “historian” went on to provide us with the definitive middle-brow apologia for FDR and JFK. Among his other works was *The Vital Center* (1949), which justified the Cold War liberals in kicking their erstwhile communist allies out of the citadel of power and provided the real starting point for the noisy and pernicious phenomenon of neoconservatism. (And all this accomplished while facing the challenges of a *Playboy* interview and the Kennedy swimming pool!) Our memoirist’s value as a scholar is conclusively exhibited by his *The Imperial Presidency* (1973), in which he pointed to the dangerous ambitions of executive power under Nixon while suavely justifying the far worse usurpations of Nixon’s predecessors as necessary and good.

So Schlesinger is not the “finest historian of our age.” But he has known a lot of important people and been in a lot of important places, so surely *A Life in the Twentieth Century* is an interesting, if not a “fabulous,” look at our times just passed? Would that it were so. Alas, it is hard to believe anyone could plow through these nearly 600 pages of trivia except a New Deal junkie or a collector of celebrity anecdotes. Autobiography at this level of exhaustive but essentially unrevealing detail might be mildly interesting for a really important historical figure,

though I doubt it. For a merely self-important figure, it is an excruciating bore.

Does the world really need to see a picture of stalwart young Arthur busy preparing to interpret history for us all at his preschool desk in Iowa City? Or to savor the boyhood experiences of his father in Xenia, Ohio? (Schlesinger Senior actually was a serious historian of sorts, despite ending up at Harvard.) Do we really need to know faculty-room gossip at Cambridge among historians now, mostly justly, forgotten? One bit of gossip does *not* appear. It can’t be proved now but was told to me years ago by an honest man who had been a visiting professor at Harvard: Mrs. Schlesinger, Sr., once got up and fled when a black man sat down beside her in a theater. Here we have the true nature of Boston liberalism revealed in all its naked glory.

Young Arthur never lets us forget that his doings were a part of history even before he was born. “Nineteen twelve was the exciting year of Wilson’s New Freedom and of Roosevelt’s New Nationalism.” The events in his life are also historical watersheds: “My formal education now began.” “In September 1931 I traveled forty miles north from Cambridge to boarding school.” “Boredom arose in my third undergraduate year.” “The war was everywhere,” concluded the young warlord at Harvard in 1939. “The war rumbled on” still for our hero as he labored on his first book. “When we wanted sandwiches, we had to use a knife to slice the bread; sliced bread was still in the future.” “That summer of 1935 was the last totally relaxed time,” for it was then the noble Arthur began the literary career that was to make our times comprehensible to all. “The variety was exciting,” he writes of the papers that flowed across his desk in the *Office of War Information*. And so on.

Is there nothing good to be said at all about *A Life in the Twentieth Century*? Well, it drops a lot of big and medium-sized names, for those that like that sort of thing. The book’s main virtue, however, is as primary research material for the future historian of the smug, self-aggrandizing Boston/New York intelligentsia which has been a curse to the American people for two centuries and more now. I’ll give that future scholar a working title

for his research: "Pseudo-Intellectualism as a Force in American History."

*Clyde Wilson is thought of in some limited circles as a real historian.*

## The Bishop's Egg

by Christie Davies

The Politics of Sex and  
Other Essays on Conservatism,  
Culture, and Imagination  
by Robert Grant  
New York: St. Martin's Press;  
248 pp., \$55.00



Robert Grant's essays range widely across political philosophy, literature, and aesthetics, from Edmund Burke to Václav Havel, from Jane Austen to the fiction of the 1930's, from Shakespeare to Tolstoy, from Mozart to Rennie Mackintosh. Yet Grant is always knowledgeable, always clear and readable, always interesting. He is able to cover his range of subjects adequately, without ever lapsing into the obscurity of a polymath or the superficial dazzle of a new Renaissance man.

His most interesting essays concern the nature of conservatism. In the foreword to the book, Raymond Tallis writes:

In Grant's understanding of it . . . true conservatism is no more hostile to change than to ideas. Some change is inevitable, some positively necessary; but it must be properly informed, preserve continuity and respect tradition ("embodied practical knowledge"). Grant's conservatism is not a matter of party, nor confined to politics. It grows out of his perception of the interconnectedness of human concerns, and his respect for whatever has evolved peaceably and naturally out of our long-term dealings with each other. Such things, among them culture, elude a narrowly technological, rationalist perspective.

This is an excellent statement of what Grant stands for and why his essays will be a welcome addition to the libraries of

conservative individuals and institutions in the English-speaking countries. Grant writes well about Burke, but it is his two essays on 20th-century conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott that are of most interest. Oakeshott was a respected thinker, yet—as Grant points out—he was never a global guru (unlike, say, the vacuous John Kenneth Galbraith, the deeply flawed and ideological Gunnar Myrdal, or the fellow-travelling Harold Laski), and he deserves to be more widely known. Grant's essays will help to achieve this. Oakeshott's great contribution was to expose the irrationalism of "Rationalism," by which he meant the idea that politics and government can be planned by reference to "abstract intelligence . . . suitably backed by the necessary technical or factual knowledge." It is a "category mistake" whose proponents fail to see that "every activity generates its own kind of rationality (that is the principles articulate or otherwise, appropriate to its successful pursuit) and that it is foolish and futile to apply the techniques and assumptions appropriate to one kind of activity to others for which they were never designed and from which they never emerged."

It is not just socialism that Oakeshott is attacking but any kind of politics or political thought involving this fallacy. (As Grant points out, he was critical of Hayek as a crypto-rationalist and has nothing in common with the Archimedean rationalism of later liberal thinkers such as Rawls and Nozick.) On the latter thinkers, Grant comments shrewdly that "it would not be altogether unjust to describe their efforts as exactly the sort of 'crib' to politics that Oakeshott once accused Marxism of being." Oakeshott was not a communitarian but an individualist, understood as "a virtuous explorer of his moral, cultural and intellectual inheritance."

There is an interesting continuity between the Oakeshott essays and Grant's own treatment of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the House Beautiful. Mackintosh, a Scottish architect and furniture designer, was modern and imperious and still has fanatical admirers in countries as distant from Scotland as Japan. An "aesthetic planner," as Grant calls him, he deliberately designed chairs with backs twice as high as a seated man so that they would be uncomfortable, incompatible with the presence of children, and easily breakable, particularly in the Scottish tea shops that bought them. The fragility of

the furniture emphasized the decorum of the tea rooms, in contrast to the raucous and sometimes violent inebriation of the lower-class Glaswegian bar, where even the most robust of furnishings might regularly be smashed to fragments. But then, speculation about aesthetic fashion is vain. It is difficult, for example, to see why we should accept Grant's thesis that the preceding high-Victorian interiors, whether in Scotland or America, rigorously excluded anything remotely suggestive of death from open display. Surely he is wrong; in an age of early death, the clutter of knickknacks was also a parade of relics of those who had died—the carved walrus tooth brought back by Captain Uncle Harold, long since drowned in the wintry North Atlantic; the vases left to the householder in poor consumptive cousin Mildred's will.

Robert Grant's book is a bishop's egg: Nearly all of it is good, my lord. The Oakeshott and Burke yolks will nourish the mind of the reader, and the aesthetic albumen is bound to please; only the shell is doubtful—the cover has the feel of a Carrington executed by Lytton Strachey's devotee of that name.

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## Hugging Himself

by Jeffrey Meyers

A Life of James Boswell  
by Peter Martin  
New Haven: Yale University Press;  
613 pp., \$35.00



James Boswell (1740-95), whose frank and revealing *London Journal* sold more than a million copies, is the most "modern" and widely read 18th-century author. His circle of friends—Johnson, Burke, Gibbon, Reynolds, Hume, Goldsmith, Garrick, and Fanny Burney—was the most brilliant in the history of English literature. Cursed with a morbid Calvinistic streak, Boswell had uneasy relations with his austere disapproving father, a high-court judge in Scotland, whom he compared to a cold surgical instrument. A pushy and self-promoting,