

B O O K R E V I E W S

One day in late 1955, an unassuming, middle-aged man appeared at the office of the fledgling *National Review*, found an unoccupied chair, and sat down. After peering at a typewriter for a few moments, he proceeded to punch the keys. Forty-five minutes later, he departed. After this ritual had repeated itself, once a week, for several months, a young *National Review* staffer grew indignant. On all his visits, she protested, the typewriter repairman had never examined her machine.

This "typewriter repairman," it turned out, was *National Review*'s lead book reviewer, John Chamberlain. Coming to the office for his weekly assignment, he would quietly compose his review at the typewriter with seemingly effortless grace. Then, his work completed, he would silently slip out of the office—careful not to disturb his colleagues laboring at their own projects.

These qualities of calmness, solitude, and self-effacement are abundantly reflected in John Chamberlain's newly published autobiography. For more than half a century now, Chamberlain has been leading, as he puts it, "a life with the printed word." And what an abundant life it has been! In 1926, fresh out of Yale, he became a cub reporter for the *New York Times*; within three years, he was assistant editor of the *Times*'s Sunday book review. In 1933, at the astonishingly young age of thirty, he rose to the eminence of daily book reviewer for the *Times*. For the next four years, he turned out five book reviews a week (plus sundry other essays) and solidified his reputation (in one authority's words) as the "finest critic of his generation." In the late thirties and forties, he occupied positions of influence at *Fortune*, *Life*, and *Time* under Henry Luce, with a professorship at Columbia's School of Journalism on the side. In the fifties, he was a founding editor of the *Freeman*, an editorial writer for the *Wall Street Journal*, and a valued contributor to *National Review*. In the sixties, he became one of the most respected of conservative columnists.

Along the way, he raised three children and wrote several books (including two libertarian classics, *The Enterprising Americans* and *The*

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A LIFE WITH THE PRINTED WORD

John Chamberlain / Regnery Gateway / \$12.95

George H. Nash

Roots of Capitalism). Today, in his eightieth year, John Chamberlain continues indefatigably to expound the philosophy of "voluntarism" and free-market capitalism with the same robust reasonableness that has won him journalistic admirers for five decades.

Such a life is ample subject indeed for an autobiography, and one can only be pleased that Chamberlain has written his. But the importance of *A Life with the Printed Word* transcends the particularities of a richly successful career. For like so many other American conservative luminaries since 1945, Chamberlain in his youth was a man of the radical Left. How was it that this supporter of Norman Thomas in 1932 became a Reaganite a generation later? How did a quasi-socialist of the thirties come to write the foreword to

Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* in 1944? What, in short, prevented Chamberlain from becoming (in his words) "just another New York liberal" in middle age? The story of his intellectual journey from Left to Right is the principal subject of this absorbing memoir.

One source of Chamberlain's evolution lay in his temperament. A New England Yankee who came of age in the 1920s, he shared his generation's artistic and civil libertarianism and its apolitical distrust of crusading fanaticism. He never lost these early attitudes. Even in the politics-drenched thirties, Chamberlain retained some of his youthful skepticism of concentrated power. Indifferent to the early New Deal, he was drawn instead to the Brandeisian

trust-busting philosophy of his friend Leon Henderson and to nonconformists of the Left like John Dos Passos (whose own intellectual odyssey rather strikingly resembles Chamberlain's).

The sheer act of reading, one suspects, also helped to rescue Chamberlain from stultifying leftist conformity. Reviewing a book a day for the *Times*, he discovered authors like Albert Jay Nock, the grandfather of libertarianism, and Max Eastman, who had been to Moscow and seen not the future but the truth. Later on he encountered Rose Wilder Lane and Isabel Paterson, whose *God of the Machine* "hit me like a ton of bricks" in 1943. Chamberlain must surely be one of the best-read journalists of all time; the very act of confronting an endless variety of books for review shielded him from the certitudes of the cultural commissars. Chamberlain the literary critic, one senses, could never surrender his independence to anyone's party line.

Still another factor nudging him from the Left was his experience with the Communists and their sympathizers. The most harrowing episode occurred when Walter Duranty, the *Times*'s famed Moscow correspondent, "almost casually" remarked to Chamberlain one day that three million Russians had died in a deliberate, artificial famine. (It was Stalin's method of liquidating the kulaks.) Chamberlain was aghast. How could Duranty be so callous about this gigantic horror? And why had he never even reported this story in his dispatches? Soon afterward, Chamberlain himself mentioned the murderous famine in one of his book reviews. Immediately the Communist journal *New Masses* demanded proof; Chamberlain replied by citing Duranty as his source.

Now the fat was really in the fire. In danger of losing his visa from the Soviet government, Duranty denied that he had ever said anything. The Communists, meanwhile, denounced Chamberlain with fury. Suddenly Chamberlain's reputation for veracity—and his job at the *Times*—were in peril. Fortunately, a fellow *Times* journalist, Simeon Strunsky, came forward in Chamberlain's defense; Duranty had also told Strunsky about the famine. Without this in-house corroboration, Chamberlain would likely have been fired by the *Times* and his journalistic career perhaps destroyed.



Although Chamberlain remained a man of the Left for most of the thirties, he was never a Communist. Instead, he became known in Party circles as a "dissident radical," suspect and unreliable because of his friendship with ex-Communist intellectuals.

And so an independent man of the Left he might have remained, had it not been for one event that decisively set him on the road to the Right. In 1936, through his friend Archibald MacLeish, Chamberlain joined the staff of *Fortune*. For the next decade, as a senior journalist for the Luce publications, Chamberlain had an extraordinary opportunity to study and write about the workings of American business.

It was a revelation. Freed from the environs of Greenwich Village, he began to explore a world that his literary and leftist friends never saw: the functioning world of capitalism, of free-market creativity. Traveling around the country on assignments for *Fortune*, he encountered entrepreneurs who were every bit as

capable and interesting as the literati he had left behind. Increasingly, Chamberlain's anticapitalist preconceptions dissolved. Business leaders, he discovered, were not necessarily Babbitts after all. The American economy was not "mature" and permanently stagnant. The market system *worked*. The more he examined the dynamic intricacies of the private sector, the stronger grew his commitment to voluntarism. His antipolitical impulses likewise deepened. Washington "does not originate much," he writes in these memoirs; "a country can only be happy and prosperous by keeping its politicians on a taut leash."

Eventually Chamberlain came to believe that the truly significant economic story of the thirties was not that of New Deal intervention in the economy (which failed in any case to end the Depression). It was the pioneering efforts of risk-taking entrepreneurs and technological innovators. It was they, not the politicians and regulators, who "saved the day for us in war and

established the basis for the huge post-war expansion." And, Chamberlain adds, "If I hadn't broken out of the tight little world of literary New York and gone to work for Harry Luce, I would never have seen what still eludes our Arthur Schlesingers and the others who write what passes for our 'history.'"

The opportunity to observe American business, then, liberated Chamberlain from the Left. Reading, writing, observing, he had *studied* his way out of collectivism. From the mid-1940s on, he has been a stalwart defender of entrepreneurial capitalism and an effective spokesman for the conservative movement.

All this and more Chamberlain recounts in these never-strident memoirs—a veritable travelogue through the ideological battlegrounds of half a century. It is a book filled with acute observations of people—of Henry Luce and Charles Lindbergh, Whittaker Chambers and Willi Schlamm, of journalists of the Center, Left, and Right. At times one wishes that this compact autobiography were twice as long, that Chamberlain had favored us with even more impressions of his stellar array of acquaintances, and with more about himself. In fifty-seven

years of journalism, he has known so many of the great. After completing this volume one yearns for him to tell us more.

But such expansiveness, one suspects, would be out of character for this soft-spoken New Englander. "Of all the autobiographies of ideological explorations," writes William F. Buckley in his introduction, "John Chamberlain's is surely the most soft-throated in the literature." It is a book, too, that is singularly free from rancor. Indeed, despite a career of journalistic advocacy, and an unfashionable journey from Left to Right, Chamberlain seems never to have made an enemy or lost a friend.

To those who have made his acquaintance, this remark will cause no surprise. Back in the sixties, a Harvard professor mordantly observed that Academe is a place where men of principle outnumber men of honor. John Chamberlain is a man of principle; to those who know him personally, he is a man of rare decency as well. In this age of self-advertisement, it is a pleasure to read a book by a distinguished journalist so unassuming that he could be mistaken for a typewriter repairman. *A Life with the Printed Word* is more than an illuminating trek through our times. It is the memoir of a gentleman. □

a·poc·a·lyp·tic prem·ise

adj. 1: foreboding imminent disaster or final doom

n. 1a: a proposition supposed as a basis of argument b: something assumed

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KOESTLER: A BIOGRAPHY

Iain Hamilton / Macmillan / \$19.95

Maurice Cranston

If any living writer is still being read in a hundred years time, that writer will surely be Arthur Koestler. For no one has lived so fully and intensely a uniquely twentieth-century experience, and produced books which give the feel of what it has all been like. He may even be better understood and more admired in the future than he is now, for Koestler's truth has always been too naked for many of his contemporaries to contemplate. We could not bear to see Nazism as he unveiled it until Nazism was more or less eliminated; and since Communism, as he depicts it, is still with us and still flourishing, many readers avert their eyes from Koestler's

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truth, or repudiate it, or kick him for saying things they do not want to hear, and indignantly accuse him of "helping the CIA" to sabotage détente, de-Stalinization, and peace.

Iain Hamilton's new biography of Koestler will perhaps give equal joy to those who admire him (as I do) and those who are against him. For it is a workmanlike narrative which sets out all the more interesting facts about Koestler's life; and as Koestler is the last man to want anything suppressed in order to forestall embarrassment, the record is splendidly candid and fairly complete. Hence, just as those readers who were disturbed by George Orwell's testimony to left-wing monstrosities could seize on certain aspects of Orwell's personality—his grim asceticism and almost masochistic endeavor to