

Whittaker Chambers: A Biography, by Sam Tanenhaus. (New York: Random House, 1997. Pp. 638. \$35.00)

Free-lance writer Sam Tanenhaus has made an extraordinary contribution to twentieth-century American history in his stunning new biography of Whittaker Chambers. Tanenhaus combines scholastic rigidity with his eminently readable style to create a work of the highest standard of historical biography. Whittaker Chambers emerges as a complex, enigmatic figure, misunderstood by most in his own time and by his liberal critics yet today. The author is successful in understanding and intimating the complex forces that drew Chambers to, and ultimately from, communism, and eventually toward his confrontation with Alger Hiss.

Whittaker Chambers will be forever tied to the events surrounding his accusations against Hiss, but Tanenhaus gives a much fuller picture of the man than has ever been seen before. We first see Chambers in his childhood, amidst an eccentric family always at the fringe of society. We follow him to Columbia University, where he was something of a phenomenon before deciding to leave school after his literary radicalism upset the university administration. Chambers ended up in the Communist Party, where he began to establish a reputation as a writer before dropping out of sight to do the "special" work that ultimately brought him into contact with Alger Hiss as courier and a link to the Soviet intelligence apparatus. After leaving the Communist Party, he became a powerful editor at *Time* and after the Hiss case remained an icon in the conservative movement until his death in 1961. Tanenhaus cogently presents the reader with the complete picture of Chambers, and it is an intimate portrait that would fascinate even if the Hiss case had never occurred. The author suggests that Chambers was a mis-understood genius, and it seems that he would likely have had a successful literary career had he not become involved with radical politics. Tanenhaus also superbly represents the shifting ideological persuasions of this troubled figure, explaining the reasons behind his various conversions.

Tanenhaus at times may seem too close to his subject, yet he does make it clear that Chambers was no saint. He was a man of near-slovenly personal appearance who did little to take care of himself. He was, furthermore, an uncompromising man who often went to extremes: some

of his accusations made contemporaneously with the Hiss case can only be described as far off the mark, and they contributed to the McCarthyism that soon followed Hiss's conviction of perjury.

This biography is extremely well-researched, taking advantage of recently-released documents from both behind the Iron Curtain as well as from the U.S. government. The endnotes are amply complete, and the index is quite thorough, though Tanenhaus's bibliography is dispensable, as many of the works he cites there appear in the text as well. The six-page appendix puts to rest any lingering doubts about the guilt of Alger Hiss.

Fellow ex-Communist Arthur Koestler called Whittaker Chambers "the most misunderstood person of our time" (p. 514), and the reader leaves the book convinced of this fact. Tanenhaus has produced an outstanding work which will greatly influence how historians will view Chambers in the future, yet doing so in a way that makes the book worthwhile even for lay readers to understand this episode of America's history.

Eric Owens