The making of American dreams

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James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age. By James G. Hershberg. *Knopf: 1993. Pp. 948. $35.*

PROBABLY no American in his generation made a larger mark in more different fields of intellectual activity than James B. Conant (1893 – 1978). He was a first-rate chemist, a great university president, a brave and honourable pioneer in nuclear weapons policy, a bold reformer of public education and second only to John J. McCloy as an American contributor to the new Germany. James G. Hershberg has now made a massive effort to provide the biography that has long been needed. His *James B. Conant* has important omissions and a few serious misjudgements, but it is much more often right than wrong. It is also a book so honest and comprehensive in its scholarship that the careful reader can rely on Hershberg's evidence even while doubting one or another of his conclusions.

What is most seriously missing from the book is a full explanation of what eventually defined Conant as a public man — his standing as the deeply respected and eminently successful president of Harvard University. Hershberg tells important parts of that story, such as the shift from Lawrence Lowell's focus on college life to Conant's emphasis on the professors and the crucial retreat to victory in an early battle with the central faculty over appointments. But he misses the main point: that Conant understood, exercised, defended and reinforced the final authority of the Harvard president to decide who is recommended for any faculty appointment to the governing boards (there are two at Harvard), and also who is recommended to be a provost or a dean, or indeed to hold any other office of administration. Conant exercised those powers with an integrity and intelligence that so reinforced the Harvard presidency that its basic powers have been maintained ever since. Its powerful presidency is the single most important advantage that Harvard has over its principal competitors in the front rank of American universities.

It was his standing as president of Harvard, together with his running start in scientific understanding, that made Conant the ideal choice to be the senior scientific watchman over the vast secret nuclear enterprise of the Second World War. It was also right for him to do that job while continuing as president in Cambridge, mainly as a weekend commuter on the night train between Boston and Washington. "President Conant" was a person whose name and title were resonant both in recruitment of scientists from the academy and in counsel to the Harvard man in the White House. Hershberg notes but hardly pauses to explore the extraordinary partnership between Conant and Harvard provost Paul Buck, a relationship that made this wartime arrangement possible and continued for eight years beyond, making time for the later work of President Conant the Public Citizen.

The part of Conant's life that most interests Hershberg is his work on the problem of the nuclear bomb. About half of the book relates to this subject, and those who are more interested in Conant than in the bomb will find a lot to skip. The passages on great moments are riveting: Conant's decisive perception in 1941 that the bomb was possible; his experience of the first nuclear explosion at Alamogordo in 1945; his attempt to find a way to hold back from thermonuclear weapons in 1949; his courage and ineffectiveness in an effort to prevent the outrageous injustice inflicted on Robert Oppenheimer by finding him a security risk in the Eisenhower years. The attentive audience for other parts of his nuclear story may be smaller, but for specialists Hershberg has done a great service by this detailed account of the changing thoughts of a senior participant in and observer of the bomb's first quarter of a century.

Hulton Deutsch

On the waterfront — James B. Conant in 1953.

In his discussion of Hiroshima, Hershberg also gives us a wonderfully clear illustration of a recurrent stress between his professional respect for evidence and his left-of-centre political sympathies. The central question here is what principal motive governed the decision to bomb Hiroshima — to end the Japanese war or to get ahead of the dangerous Soviets? Hershberg has found out all there is to know, and with one part of his mind he understands the historical record of the decision very well. With another part he disapproves of it, and so he concludes that Conant's campaign to defend that decision was somehow unworthy. In a footnote on page 819, he recognizes that Conant's basic view of the reasons for the Hiroshima decision is now generally accepted by professional historians. He reports their "loose consensus" that the "principal (but not *exclusive*) goal" of the attack was "winning the war as quickly as possible with minimum loss of Allied lives". Still, he somehow finds it conspiratorial for Conant in 1946 to urge Henry Stimson, as the former Secretary of War who had been the senior responsible official under Harry Truman, to defend the decision and then to help Stimson in preparing the resulting magazine article. (I know the story well because I was Stimson's assistant and scribe at the time.) Conant may have been basically right about the history, and even right that it should be explained, but Hershberg's underlying political sympathy is with later critics who have claimed that the main purpose was to impress the Russians, and he gives the chief exponent of that erroneous view the last word in his own account. The young scholar respects the claims of honest history and tries to honour them, but the young progressive gives an edge to the revisionist opinions that he would prefer to share.

I think there is a similar rush to judgement in Hershberg's assessment of Conant's role in Harvard University's resistance to McCarthyism. He believes, as I now do myself, that Conant went too far in his flat announcement that he would never knowingly join in the appointment of a Communist. Practically that judgement may have been sound, because the remaining members of the American Communist Party, from 1948 to 1953, were a generally sorry lot in terms of intelligence or intellectual honesty or both. Nevertheless, the rule was too broad. Hershberg also correctly notes a certain excess of caution in the Harvard Corporation's approach to ex-Communists. But his largest complaint is against Conant's opposition to the use of the Fifth Amendment — a witness's refusal to answer questions about other possible Communists on the ground that such answers could incriminate him or her. The historian in

Hershberg notes that Harvard in the end took a less stern position, which ex-President Conant supported. Whether it was right or wrong, Conant's initial view of resort to the Fifth Amendment was not a large matter in Harvard's overall struggle against McCarthyism.

It is a very long jump from this set of complaints to Hershberg's sweeping conclusion that on this front Conant "moved toward a subtle yet pernicious form of thought control". That is not the picture of Conant or his influence that those who were there remember, and neither Hershberg's own comments nor his footnote references give evidence supporting any such conclusion. The historian, once again, does not confirm the critic.

Diplomacy was not Conant's long suit. He failed conspicuously in wartime negotiations over nuclear cooperation with Britain, creating an impasse that was resolved only by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stimson. Nonetheless he very much wanted the appointment he won in 1953, leaving the Harvard presidency to succeed McCloy as the principal US representative in Germany, as High Commissioner and then as the first Ambassador. In these jobs, as Hershberg demonstrates, he was not so much unsuccessful as unnecessary. Dulles in Washington wanted no independent adviser in Bonn, and Adenauer recognized that he could do better by going directly to Dulles than by going through a man who did not know how to have no opinion of his own. Conant was neither the first nor the last ambassador to misunderstand the range of his role in the age of the airplane and telephone, but his appointment, and a later two years as a private citizen in Berlin, did allow him to play a significant personal part as an outstanding American who honoured the best of the German past, especially in science, and deeply believed in an honourable German future.

Finally, in his last round of public service, Conant became the leading advocate of reform in American public schooling. Here he made a mark exceptional in its force and clarity, but he would not be surprised that the American nonsystem has been resistant to his basic programme of reform: quality education for all children in public schools, to provide both equal opportunity and a fully demanding challenge to the young of all capabilities. Hershberg finds him farsighted in observing and describing the failure of public schooling in urban ghettos, but at first insensitive to the way black leaders would respond to his apparent acceptance of *de facto* segregation. Once again the analyst outran the diplomat. Conant's volumes on public education were nonetheless a major contribution, in yet another field, to understanding of a continuing American problem.

Conant was not an easy man to get close to, and it is not surprising that Hershberg has trouble understanding his family life. He tries hard, and Conant's family have tried to help him, both with family papers and with interviews. But the closer he gets to the man, the less certain his touch. The primary cause of the trouble is Conant himself; he was a genuinely reticent descendant of the Pilgrims. Yet the best guide here is not Hershberg's book but Conant's memoir, *My Several Lives* (underrated by Hershberg). Conant had an essentially wonderful marriage, for example, and that reality shows through in his own book. Hershberg offers more extensive evidence on family troubles, but except for the grievous illness of the older son it is mostly about difficulties of the kind that come sooner or later to most families. There is no matching emphasis on the integrity and intensity of a great marriage, old-fashioned in that the man's work came first, but old-fashioned also in his reliance on his wife, and in the way they made most large choices together.

Overall, this book is an impressive achievement. In the modern process of American academic appointment and promotion that Conant did so much to shape, nothing is more important than a young scholar's first major book. After Conant's time, I sat as a Harvard dean through dozens of presidential meetings in which such scholars and their books were considered, and I have found myself wondering how this book would fare before such a committee with Conant himself presiding. I think there would be criticism and perhaps even complaint from the chair, but Conant was an extraordinarily fair-minded man. He might well propose to disqualify himself, but I think such a proposal would not be in Hershberg's interest. I think that Conant would turn out to share my own strong opinion that on the evidence of this book the author has shown himself to be a historian of notable achievement and promise, and well qualified, as far as a single book can show it, to do with distinction the work that Conant himself may in the end have cared about most: the work of a permanent member of the faculty in a leading research university. □

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Hearing the deeper harmonies

Laura Garwin

The Hidden Landscape: A Journey into the Geological Past. By Richard Fortey. *Cape: 1993. Pp. 288. £19.99.*

I HAVE never met Richard Fortey, but from his book I can think of no better companion for a walk through the British countryside. Stand with him on a bleak Yorkshire moor and be transported to a lush rain forest of 100 million years before; gaze across the low, rounded hills of northwest Scotland and recognize a landscape inherited from the Precambrian; look down on the waters of the English Lake District and see reflections of a glacier that vanished 7,000 years ago. But these links between past times and present landscapes are just the start, for Fortey's mission is to show us that the influence of the rocks beneath our feet extends far beyond scenery — to flora and fauna, agriculture and architecture, and beyond, into our daily lives.

The 'hidden landscape' of the book's title has several different meanings, the most straightforward of which refers to the fact that the bedrock geology of the British Isles (and indeed of most parts of the world) lies hidden beneath a blanket of soil and vegetation. Fortey imagines himself "rolling back this skin, as one might a carpet, to reveal the rocks beneath". Applying this process to the British Isles reveals an extraordinary variety packed into a small space: sedimentary, igneous and metamorphic rocks, and representatives of each of the geological periods. This richness of geology is one way in which the book avoids being too parochial. The other is Fortey's approach: by travelling chronologically upwards through the geological column, rather than geographically around the British Isles, he can tell us something of the history of life on Earth, and of the wandering continents, along the way.

In fact, Fortey packs a lot of modern Earth science into the book — including the story of the vanished ocean of Iapetus, which separated northern from southern Britain until it closed about 400 million years ago, leaving only the Solway Firth, the sediments of the Southern Uplands, and some otherwise very confusing fossils to bear witness to its former existence. We also learn about radiometric dating, experimental petrology and even the early Solar System. But while these forays into geological science undoubtedly enrich the broth, Fortey's greatest delight lies in revealing the connections between geology and our everyday experience of the natural world.

And well might he delight, for the connections are many and multifarious. At the broadest, most familiar scale, we see how the Highland Boundary Fault creates a sharp transition between the comfortable farmlands of the Midland