

Charles Williams. *The Last Great Frenchman: A Life of General de Gaulle.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995. xvi + 544 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-471-11711-7.



Reviewed by David R. Watson

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To write a fully satisfactory biography of Charles de Gaulle would be a formidable undertaking. As is often the case with contemporary history, the source material is at the same time overwhelming in its abundance and yet often unable to provide answers to the most important questions. Sources for a life of de Gaulle begin with his own published writings, which now include his published books and his memoirs, as well as the two multi-volume collections of speeches and papers (*Discours et messages*, 5 vols. [1970 seq.] and *Lettres, notes et carnets*, 12 vols. [1980-88]). But once his political life began, a major part of the sources for French and international history since 1940 would have to be included among the essential sources for his life.

The history of international relations during and after the Second World War can now be studied in immense detail from primary sources, published and unpublished. This period alone has produced a large number of secondary accounts in which de Gaulle figures prominently. The Resistance within France and the Liberation are in themselves fields of study to which eminent schol-

ars have devoted their lives. Similarly, the resolution of the Algerian crisis, the establishment of the Fifth Republic, and the domestic and foreign policies of his ten years as President of France from 1959 to 1969 are in each case topics that have produced huge bibliographies. It is true that by strict standards of scholarship, there is a big difference between the period before and after 1958, in that after this date few archives have yet been opened to research. So there is a difference between the study of de Gaulle's career up to 1958, which has now been illuminated by many works, based on primary source materials, and the post-1958 period, for which memoirs and reminiscences play a much more important role. Nevertheless, for either period the materials to be scanned are immense.

The *Institut Charles de Gaulle* is devoted to the study of a figure who has become a mythical national hero, according to a recent opinion poll, ahead even of Napoleon, behind only Charlemagne. The *Institut* has organised several academic conferences devoted to his role, and produced many volumes from their proceedings, cul-

minating in the massive conference in 1990 to celebrate the centennial of his birth. Its proceedings amount to seven volumes totaling more than 6,000 pages.

How can one author hope to cope with all this material? The problem, of course, is not unique. It is inherent in all scholarly work in recent and contemporary history. The answer has to be found in the co-operative nature of scholarship. No one individual can read more than a small proportion of the relevant material, but individuals can study particular topics, answering the questions that arise insofar as the sources allow. When a factual record has been established, it can be used to analyse the significance of the events concerned, to reflect on them, evaluate them and seek for insights. In de Gaulle's case no academic author has yet tried to meet the challenge of providing such a synthesis on a substantial scale. There are good studies of the whole of de Gaulle's career by academic authors, but they are very short, in the nature of student textbooks; I refer to the works by Julian Jackson and Andrew Shennan (1993) and to the collective volume edited by H. Gough and J. Horne (1994). But the only large-scale biography is that of the French journalist Jean Lacouture--three massive volumes in French (1984), slightly condensed in the two-volume English translation (1990-91).

The author of the present work, Charles Williams (Lord Williams of Elvel, Labour peer and deputy leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords), is not an academic either. As he states in his preface, he has been helped by academic historians, notably by Philip Bell, formerly of the University of Liverpool. Williams has produced a factually accurate, and well-informed account of de Gaulle's life. It is another matter, though, whether it can be seen as required reading. For a more detailed narrative has already been provided by Lacouture, and it is not clear that the present book provides anything more. It relies on a fairly limited range of published sources, with

the addition of some anecdotes quoted from interviews with people who had known de Gaulle. As is usually the case, such anecdotes seem often to be apocryphal and add little to our understanding.

The author passes fairly rapidly over de Gaulle's early life, and over the First World War, his wounding and capture and years as a prisoner of war in Germany. The interwar period is also invoked in a brief fashion: his relationship with Petain, first as one of his proteges, and then the breach between them. There is a far more detailed account of his experience in battle in 1940, and of the wartime years as leader of Free France. This is all very well done; it is solidly based on Philip Bell's work on 1940, on Francois Kersaudy's *Churchill and de Gaulle*, and on other standard sources, such as the memoirs by General Edward L. Spears, Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, among others. It is a reliable and well-written account, but it cannot be said to add anything new to the often-told tale of de Gaulle's troubled relations with his Anglo-Saxon allies.

The next section on the Liberation and the establishment of the Fourth Republic is adequate, but less confident. There are one or two small errors--it is not correct to say, for example, that de Gaulle was elected President of the Republic at this time [in November 1945]--and the background of domestic French politics is dealt with in a sketchy fashion, heavily dependent on Lacouture. His resignation in 1946 and the attempted political rebirth with the *Rassemblement du peuple francais* in 1948 get little more than a page. This is followed by a section entitled "Philosopher," which is the only part of the book where an overview of his career and of its significance is attempted. Writers who influenced him are listed--Maurice Barres, Charles Maurras, Charles Peguy, Henri Bergson, the gurus of the decade 1900-1910. But their ideas are not really discussed; nor is there more than a brief reference to the famous opening passage of the War Memoirs, "a certain

idea of France." There is a brief discussion of the intellectual background to the constitutional ideas that were to be put into practice by the Fifth Republic. There is nothing wrong with any of this, but it is all brief and limited. The author then turns to de Gaulle's private life, family, and religious practice.

We then come to 1958, and the second great crisis of French history in which de Gaulle played the essential role. His return to power and the resolution of the Algerian crisis are dealt with clearly and accurately in an account based on Lacouture and on Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace* (1977). Then there is a narrative of his years as President of the Fifth Republic that is stronger on foreign policy than on domestic matters. Finally, there is a very rapid account of the events of 1968, the lost referendum of 1969, and the return to Colombey and the task of completing his memoirs, cut short by his death in 1970. The book ends in this fashion with no attempt at a conclusion that would seek to analyse de Gaulle's career and its immense significance.

Thus what we have is a lively and well-written narrative, based on a small part of the existing secondary literature. It is not surprising that it is strongest in its account of de Gaulle's relations with the Allies in the 1940-44 period, as the secondary literature in English is much fuller on this than on any other aspect of his life. But if one believes that his most fundamental achievement was to recast the political institutions of France, perhaps even to recast its political culture, this book misses much that is of the greatest importance. The attempt to define "Gaullism" is perfunctory, a few sentences stating that it consists of giving priority to the interests of France, that they need to be protected by an aloof and determined leadership, and that the leader should have a direct relationship with the people. But these ideas are not analysed, and the author goes on to assert that in the real world they were often disregarded because of the "vagaries of the general's own very

individual character." He illustrates this point by saying that French interests would have been served best by maintaining the closest possible relationship with the United States. But, according to Lord Williams, that relationship was "difficult," not because of the fact that Roosevelt "treated him with barely disguised scorn," and pursued a pro-Vichy policy almost to the end of the war, but because de Gaulle, "a Jesuit-educated child of the nineteenth century," had a confused picture of America and Americans. This judgment seems to me to miss the point in a big way; as an analysis of "Gaullism" and of its purported failure in practice, it is totally inadequate.

In conclusion, this book can be recommended to the general reader who wants a lively and factually accurate narrative of de Gaulle's life, but it does not offer much new to those who have read earlier biographies, and it fails to provide serious analysis of the significance of the general's achievement for the history of France, and of the world. Perhaps it is time that an academic writer faced the challenge of providing a detailed synthesis of what is certainly a major topic. Now that biographies are no longer regarded as beyond the pale by French academics, presumably this will soon be done.

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