



SIR JOHN WHEELER-BENNETT

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1902-1975

THERE cannot have been many Fellows of the Academy who would describe themselves as gentlemen-riders, and fewer still who have used their accomplishments as horsemen to lay the foundations of a career as an outstanding historian of their own times. In 1929, John Wheeler-Bennett, then 27 years old, was looking for a way to establish himself in Germany which would allow him to study what was taking place without drawing attention to himself. He found the answer in renting a small stud near Fallingbostal on the Lüneburg Heath (where the German Army Olympic team trained) and devoting himself to horse breeding and racing. Among the tests which he learned to pass was that of keeping a monocle in his eye without rim or cord while jumping a fence. 'I also learned' (he adds in his memoirs) 'a lot beside equestrian proficiency'—a characteristic phrase—'and met many people who were subsequently of great service to me in Berlin.'¹ No single sentence could better convey the secret of his success.

John Wheeler-Bennett was born at Keston in Kent on 13 October 1902, the youngest son of an elderly father (born 1840) who was a prosperous City merchant. His mother, twenty years younger, was a Canadian from Nova Scotia. Through her he traced his descent to a Virginian great-grandmother, whose family had fought on the Confederate side in the American Civil War and who had subsequently emigrated to the Maritime Provinces. The boy was sent to a preparatory school at Westgate and in the Spring of 1914 was taken on a tour of the Continent, in the closing months of the old Europe, enabling him to see the last review of the Prussian Guard by the German Emperor and to attend a performance at the Vienna Opera with Franz-Joseph in the Imperial box.

The school at Westgate was in the front line of enemy air attacks and JWB narrowly escaped being killed in an air raid

¹ The three volumes of memoirs are an invaluable source for Wheeler-Bennett's life. The quotation is from the first volume: *Knaves, Fools and Heroes, In Europe between the Wars* (London, Macmillan, 1974), p. 31. The subsequent volumes are: *Special Relationships, America in Peace and War* (ibid., 1975) and *Friends, Enemies and Sovereigns* (ibid., 1976). They are referred to as JWB I, II, III respectively.

in 1916. He suffered serious shell-shock which left him with a bad stammer. His general health was also affected, costing him his place at Rugby and Charterhouse, for both of which he had been entered, and later at Christ Church. Malvern, however, gave him a passion for history, and Coxe's *History of the House of Hapsburg*, which he read in the History Sixth, a life-long interest in both Central Europe and the institution of monarchy.

Shortly after the end of the War, instead of entering a university, JWB accepted an invitation to act as an unpaid personal assistant to Sir Neill Malcolm, who had been Head of the British Military Mission in Berlin immediately after the Armistice. He accompanied his chief on several government missions in the Far East which deepened his interest in international relations, and it was Neill Malcolm who directed his attention to the importance of what was happening in Germany.

The effort to work out a stable post-war settlement in Europe fascinated a young man whose hero was Anthony Eden: he formed the ambition to write the history of international relations in his own time. The way he set about preparing for this was unusual. He was already working in the publicity department of the League of Nations Union and in 1924 he established his own Information Service on International Affairs. This offered subscribers a fortnightly *Bulletin of International News*, and inaugurated a series of more substantial publications to provide details and reliable background information about the long drawn-out negotiations on Disarmament, Security, and Reparations which lasted from the Paris Peace Conference to 1933. Wheeler-Bennett showed enterprise in seeing that there was a market for such a service; but, even with funds of his own to back his idea, it required other qualities in addition to enterprise to make a success of it in practice, especially for a young man who had no formal qualifications and was only twenty-two when he started.

These qualities were of two different kinds. The first, at a time when there was nothing to take as a model, was a shrewd grasp of the level of accuracy and seriousness at which to aim, together with the intellectual capacity and political judgement to achieve it. The second was a mixture of persuasiveness, charm, and audacity which, despite the handicap of his stammer, enabled him to cajole older people, and especially those who were socially or politically influential, into subscribing to his service and providing him with information and introductions. Although he made himself one of the best

informed young men in Europe, mixing easily with diplomats, politicians, soldiers, and journalists, he preserved both his independence and his reputation for discretion. He published nothing in the Press and, while a connoisseur of scandal, distinguished very clearly between what he heard and what he could print.

International relations as a subject of study had hardly been born, and in addition to the fortnightly Bulletin (which he edited until 1932) he started to publish a series of information studies which applied to contemporary affairs the standards of historical scholarship. The first, which appeared in 1925 under the austere title *Information on the Problem of Security*, with an introduction by Sir Neill Malcolm, was followed (1926) by a companion volume, *Information on the Problem of Security 1917-26*, with an introduction by H. A. L. Fisher.¹ Together they traced the history of disarmament from the Peace Conference to Locarno, and they were followed by others, up to two or three hundred pages in length, complete with documentary appendices, which still provide valuable guides to the background, for example, to the Young Plan and Hague Agreements. Nearly fifty years afterwards they were reprinted in the United States, striking testimony to the quality of the original workmanship in a field where the discard rate is naturally high.

As chairman of the executive committee of his Information Service, JWB secured Lt.-Gen. Sir George MacDonagh, a former Director of Military Intelligence; as treasurer Oliver Brett, later Lord Esher, and as one of the members of the committee 'Baffy' Dugdale, the niece and biographer of Balfour, in whose house he met the redoubtable Louis Namier.² Namier became Wheeler-Bennett's mentor in the art of writing history. He read and criticized everything Wheeler-Bennett wrote, in manuscript, until his death in 1960. Namier also introduced JWB to Harold Macmillan, another lifelong friend and the publisher of both men's books.

By 1930 the Information Service had established sufficient of a reputation for the Royal Institute of International Affairs (chairman, Sir Neill Malcolm) to invite JWB to create the information department they had so far failed to establish and

¹ This was written in collaboration with F. E. Langerman.

² A loan of £500 by JWB to Namier was scrupulously acknowledged by the latter in the introduction as one of the means by which he had supported himself in writing his classic study, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, published in 1929.

to merge his own organization with it. The transfer of committee and staff was made *en bloc*; Chatham House took over the publication of the fortnightly *Bulletin* (which continued until 1955 and was then succeeded by the present *World Today*) and JWB himself, aged 28, became Director of Information. In addition to further volumes in the series of information studies¹ he started and edited a new annual series of *Documents on International Affairs* to match Arnold Toynbee's annual *Surveys of International Affairs*. The first volume (for the year 1928) appeared in 1929. Wheeler-Bennett continued to edit the series (latterly with Stephen Heald) until 1936. It continued until the volume for 1963 and can truly be said to have been one of the foundations for the scholarly study and teaching of international affairs.

Wheeler-Bennett took a natural pleasure in social life and had the necessary private means to do so. No one was better informed about the best restaurants in half-a-dozen capitals or a member of more clubs. He was a self-confessed Romantic, taking a young man's delight in the dramatic, the adventurous and the unexpected. An amusing companion, warm-hearted and responsive to anything that touched his imagination, there was a touch of Lord Peter Wimsey about his enjoyment of his own performance. Not for nothing were John Buchan, Anthony Hope, and the Baroness Orczy among his favourite authors.

'It is not true,' he wrote in his memoirs, 'as some of my friends alleged, that I kept a flat, a car, a dog and—I have little doubt that some of them added—a mistress, in every capital in Europe. There was a moment, however, when I had a flat, a car and a Great Dane in London; a stud, three horses, a car and a Great Dane in Fallingbostal; and an apartment and a car in Berlin.'²

Characteristically the flat in London was in the Albany and the apartment in Berlin in the Kaiserhof, an establishment not unlike the old Brown's Hotel in London in which provincial nobility and minor royalty stayed on their periodic visits to the capital. Nor was his acquaintance with the social world of the 1920s limited to Europe. From 1923 onwards he paid annual visits to the USA, which he described as his second home. He knew New York, in his own phrase, from its *Great Gatsby* days, and belonged to three of its best clubs, the Century, the Knickerbocker, and the Brook. He was equally at home in Boston,

¹ See bibliography at end.

² JWB I, pp. 31-2.

Harvard, Chicago, and his beloved Virginia, where he settled for a time in the late 1930s and met his future wife Ruth.

JWB's delight in a world which it is now hard to believe ever existed in the twentieth century was unaffected. He never lost its sense of style and its manners which—together with his monocle and his carnation—he carried, unperturbed and debonair (a word that would have pleased him), into the graceless and utilitarian post-war world. He had a genius for friendship and few men can have made—and kept—more friends of more diverse character and background. This was hardly surprising, for he was a prince of companions, generous, affectionate, far more interested in others than in himself, entertaining, full of laughter and good stories, prepared to pursue any hare in conversation, a man for all occasions, grim as well as happy, the staunchest and most loyal of friends, whose arrival brought light and warmth to the greyest day.

Moreover, from his early days, JWB did not keep separate but combined his rare social gifts with his passion for historical inquiry, disciplining himself to the hard work and critical standards which this required. At the same time he made the fullest possible use of his wide acquaintance to pursue his political and historical interests with acumen and persistence. Thus, on his earliest visits to the United States he succeeded in penetrating to President Wilson, Colonel House, and President Coolidge; and once he got in knew the questions to put and the way in which—despite his stammer—to draw out men much older than himself whom he was meeting for the first time.

There is no better example of this than his first visit to Berlin. He perplexed his host, Harold Nicolson, then serving as Counsellor of Embassy, with a request to arrange a meeting with the man who had secured the continuity of the German Army after 1918, General von Seeckt. As Nicolson complained, for a foreigner even to meet Seeckt was difficult enough, but JWB persisted and, once he obtained entry, showed his skill in disarming Seeckt's suspicion that he was a journalist. When the General kept him waiting and received him coldly, asking him what he wanted, his young visitor skilfully introduced the word 'Gorlice', the name of the battle on the Eastern Front, little known in the West, in which Seeckt had first shown his gifts as a commander. The upshot was that he was not only invited to lunch but that Seeckt talked with a freedom which left Harold Nicolson incredulous, until he confirmed Wheeler-Bennett's account from the General himself. By carefully keeping away,

to begin with, from the more recent and controversial events in which Seeckt had been involved as Commander-in-Chief of the German Army under the Republic, JWB won his confidence and later his friendship, thereby securing access to an invaluable source for the inner history of post-war Germany.

Sir Neill Malcolm had long urged Wheeler-Bennett to make Germany the focus of his studies, arguing that, for better or worse, the course of events there would determine the future of Europe and the possibility of another war. In the course of a ten-day railway journey on the Trans-Siberian railway from Chang-Chun to Moscow and Berlin—nothing delighted JWB more in telling the story than the exotic setting—Sir Neill persuaded him that he should set himself up in Germany in order to observe what was happening there at first-hand.

This decision, made in 1929, was to determine the course of the rest of Wheeler-Bennett's life. Sir Neill Malcolm was right: Germany was to prove 'the catalytic agency' of the years later to be described as 'between the Wars', and Wheeler-Bennett was able to place himself in a position where every historian would give most to be, in the right place at the right time, as an eyewitness of one of the most dramatic and decisive series of events in the history of twentieth-century Europe. The impressions left on him by his years in Germany, 1929-34, were ineradicable. They formed his view of the 'German problem' with which he was to be engaged for the next 40 years, and they constituted his working capital as an historian, the equivalent of the years of graduate study, at once far richer in experience and far more difficult to match with the requirements of the historian's craft than the traditional training in the use of archives.

To put his decision into effect he bought the stud at Fallingbostal and rented the apartment in the Kaiserhof Hotel in Berlin immediately opposite the Reich Chancellor's palace and within a stone's throw of the German Foreign Office in the Wilhelmstraße. Amongst others who made the Kaiserhof their social headquarters were the Nazi Party leaders, including Hitler, for whom a large table was reserved each afternoon at tea-time.

Wheeler-Bennett arrived in time to see Berlin at the height of its equivocal fame as the capital of Weimar Germany. Within a year Weimar as one of the great epochs of liberation and experiment was over and Germany plunged into the Great

Depression, but he did not have to re-create the legend (or myth) of Weimar from documents and photographs later; he had experienced it at first hand.

His primary interest, however, was in the political fate of the Weimar Republic, and he set to work systematically to build up a network of political contacts. These extended to the Left—for example, Chancellor Mueller; Karl Severing, the Social Democratic Minister of the Interior in Prussia; the Communist Ernst Torgler, and the pacifist Karl von Ossietzky—but were principally with the more conservative groups which assumed the responsibility for government with the overthrow of Mueller's Social Democratic coalition in March 1930. This marked the onset of the long-drawn-out economic and political crisis that ended with the passage of Hitler's Enabling Act three years later. Franz von Papen put him up for the *Herren-Reiterverband* (The Gentlemen Riders' Club), Schacht for the Union Club (described as 'a curious amalgam of the Athenaeum and Brooks's') and he was made an honorary member of the *Herrenklub*. He became a close friend of General Groener, who alone had had the courage to tell the Kaiser in 1918 that he no longer commanded the confidence of his troops and who became Minister of Defence under the Republic. He kept up his visits to von Seeckt; rode with General von Schleicher, the *éminence grise* of the German Army, in the Tiergarten; cultivated Schleicher's PRO, Major Marcks, and lunched with ex-Chancellor Luther who had succeeded Schacht as President of the Reichsbank.

Twice Wheeler-Bennett was invited to the Nazi *Stammtisch* in the Kaiserhof, met Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, and Roehm, and several times heard the first two speak to mass meetings in the Berlin *Sportspalast*. A more congenial *Stammtisch*, to which he was admitted as a regular member, was that reserved every evening in the Taverne Restaurant for the British and American foreign correspondents in the golden age of their profession. Amongst those with whom he regularly exchanged information were Norman Ebbutt of *The Times*, Douglas Reid, Freddy Voigt, Darcy Gillie, Hugh Carleton Greene, and the Americans H. R. Knickerbocker, Bill Shirer, Edgar Mowrer, Raymond Gram Swing, and John Gunther—perhaps the most brilliant collection of journalistic talent ever assembled in one place. The one regular woman member of the circle was Elizabeth Wiskemann whose career as a contemporary historian affords an interesting parallel to Wheeler-Bennett's own.

But his key source was Brüning. It was Brüning, leader of the parliamentary group of the Catholic Centre Party, who at the age of 43 succeeded Mueller as Chancellor in March 1930 and from then until the end of May 1932 sought to master the crisis which eight months later brought Hitler to power. The friendship between Wheeler-Bennett and Brüning was close: 'When I was in Berlin during his term in office I saw him nearly every evening. I would walk across from the Kaiserhof to the side door of the *Reichskanzlei* and when he became his own foreign minister, I had ready access to his State Secretary, Bernhard von Bülow.'

Wheeler-Bennett later spoke of seeing himself, from the beginning, as an observer and an historian. But there are enough hints in his memoirs, as there were in occasional remarks which he let slip during conversation, that he hoped to do more than just observe, that he also hoped to influence the course of events. In default of a political or diplomatic career, for which his stammer would have been a heavy handicap, he showed his innate understanding of politics by seizing on the collection of accurate intelligence and its presentation to those with the power to shape policy and make decisions as his personal contribution to achieving a stable settlement in Europe. This was a powerful motive in the effort to establish his information service and, when he moved to Germany, on Neill Malcolm's urging, it was with the knowledge and approval of the Permanent Head of the Foreign Office, Vansittart.

I became in effect an alternative and purely unofficial channel of communication between leading German politicians and public figures (excepting Nazis) and London. . . . I was able to make some contributions of my own. I was neither a professional diplomat nor in any sense a 'secret agent'. I was paid neither salary or expenses. Perhaps the best, though not the most flattering, description of my international role is that of a 'convenience'.¹

He goes on to quote with satisfaction a minute on a paper which he submitted to the Foreign Office in June 1943. When one of the FO officials who read the memorandum asked who had written it and what status he enjoyed, he received the answer noted on the jacket that the author had long made a study of German affairs.

'It is Mr. W-B's personal trade, and he does it *con amore*, as he has for 20 years past; praise and thanks would surely be welcome.'¹

¹ JWB I, p. 15.

A discreet account of one such episode as 'go-between' in June 1931, when he met Brüning in London and accompanied him back to Germany, is to be found in the first volume of JWB's autobiography.¹ He did not, in fact, succeed in influencing events, but the opportunity to involve himself in the drama added a walking-on part to his role of spectator and so enriched the experience on which he was later to draw as an historian. The lesson which it enforced was 'if only'—if only the German parties, the Nationalists and the Communists in particular, had seen what they were doing in bringing down the Weimar régime; if only the Western Powers had shown in time the understanding they were only too willing to show in appeasing Hitler. To someone who lived through these years and saw the opportunities lost, it was hard to believe that the outcome was inevitable, or that human judgement and will—or the lack of them—did not affect it.

There is no need to recount here the hectic course of German history through the long-drawn-out crisis of economic depression, organized violence on the streets, and a succession of bitterly fought elections. The turning-point in Wheeler-Bennett's view was the dismissal of Brüning, at the end of May 1932, deserted by those conservative groups which ought to have done most to support him against the radical threat whether from the Right or the Left. After that, JWB decided to liquidate his assets in Germany, believing that unless a miracle occurred, Hitler would come to power. Although he held Papen, Brüning's successor, in contempt, he did not, however, give up his visits to the Reichskanzlei and in November 1932 he sent a letter to *The Times*, on his own responsibility, setting out a formula for a Disarmament Convention to which he had got Papen's agreement and which, he hoped, might give the latter's Government the success abroad denied to Brüning. Later research² suggests that the Germans deliberately misled him about their intentions. Wheeler-Bennett's formula was initially well received by the Foreign Office, but the British then began to feel that the Germans were trying to improve appearances without offering anything substantial, and JWB received a dressing down for meddling in matters he did not

¹ JWB I, pp. 44-6. For his visit with Brüning to Geneva, in April 1932, see pp. 50-1.

² See E. W. Bennett, *German Rearmament and the West, 1932-3* (Princeton 1979), pp. 241-2. I owe this reference to Mr A. J. Nicholls.

understand. Papen in fact was already on his way out as a result of General Schleicher's intrigues. His revenge was to engineer the fall of Schleicher in his turn by forming the coalition which brought Hitler to power as Chancellor and himself as Vice-Chancellor.

For some time Wheeler-Bennett had been collecting material for a book on Germany during the First World War and the Weimar Republic, but it was only after Brüning's dismissal that he decided to make this into a biography of Hindenburg. In the last fortnight of Brüning's Chancellorship, when the intrigues against him were reaching their climax, Wheeler-Bennett saw him nightly and took copious notes including a record, the day after it happened, of Brüning's final interview with Hindenburg. Groener had been driven out of office earlier in the month of May, and Brüning urged JWB to secure from him a first-hand account of the earlier crisis of 1918 in which Hindenburg had avoided the responsibility of telling the Kaiser that the War was lost and he must give up the throne.

The final stages in the Field Marshal-President's equivocal career, which had begun in the remote days of the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, took place in a Germany in which the long-talked-of revolution was put into effect not by the Left but by the Nazis. It was a sequel not a prelude to Hitler's becoming Chancellor, and it completely discomfited those like Papen who had brought him into office. Wheeler-Bennett was there to see for himself the Reichstag building burn and to listen to Papen's complacent assurances that Hitler was the prisoner of his cabinet. On 23 March 1933, he attended the sitting of the Reichstag in the Kroll Opera House, at which, to the accompaniment of menacing chanting from the SA mob outside, 'Give us the Bill or else fire and murder', Hitler was voted the emergency powers which enabled him to carry through his revolution, not against but with the full power and authority of the State. Away from Germany during the summer of 1933, JWB returned in time to help in smuggling Brüning out of the country before the new crisis of 1934. This time the prize was the succession to the failing President, Hindenburg, and Hitler was confronted with the choice between curbing or giving free rein to the radical wing of the Party and the brown-shirted SA, for whom the revolution had not gone far enough.

The crisis was precipitated by Papen who saw the chance to rehabilitate himself—he was still nominally Vice-President—by calling (with Hindenburg's blessing) for an end to Nazi

excesses and the repudiation of the radicals' demand for a 'Second Revolution'. In order to make sure that the speech—delivered at Marburg on 17 June 1934—was given full coverage abroad, Papen took JWB into his confidence and gave him copies in advance—which, it turned out, were the only ones to get through. The dénouement was delayed until the end of the month with Hitler giving a characteristic display of vacillation and indecision as the prelude to ruthless action.

In the interval, Edgar Jung, the man who had written Papen's speech and then gone into hiding, asked to see JWB and met him secretly in a wood near Döberitz.

There, sitting on a log, we talked for hours. He knew that he would soon be killed; he said so. He urged me not to waste time in conversation. 'You are writing a book on Hindenburg,' he said. 'You must listen to me.' And he told me many things, of which I made brief notes on envelopes and any scraps of paper I happened to have about me, and subsequently used. When we parted I knew that I was saying goodbye to a man already dead.¹

When Hitler had nerved himself to act, he liquidated the SA leadership in the 'Night of the Long Knives' and ended all talk of a Second Revolution. At the same time, he served unmistakable notice that any attempt to restrict his freedom of action from the opposite direction, whether by conservatives or liberals, would be stamped out by force. Only Hindenburg's personal intervention saved Papen's life. Edgar Jung was murdered, Schleicher and his wife shot down in their own home, and Wheeler-Bennett, whose talks with Papen had been recorded and whose rooms at the Kaiserhof were ransacked by the SS and Gestapo, only escaped because of an unexpected call from Sir Neill Malcolm to join him in Switzerland. In return for the liquidation of the SA (whose ambitions threatened their privileged position), the German High Command held its hand and, when Hindenburg died on 2 August, ordered the Army to take a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler as the Führer of the German People and the new Head of State.

I have devoted so much space to Wheeler-Bennett's time in Germany—he was not yet 32 when he left it—partly because of its intrinsic interest, but also because it was this experience that formed him as a historian. He had now to show that he was capable not only of observing history in the making but of writing it.

¹ JWB I, p. 91.

Although in the 1930s—for that matter in the 1950s—an interest in the history of one's own time was looked at askance in the universities, and anything after 1914 referred to scornfully as 'politics', there were distinguished models for such an activity in Thucydides, Tacitus, Clarendon, and Churchill (*The World Crisis*). The difference was that Clarendon and Churchill, like Thucydides, combined the role of historian with that of a participant in the events they described; Wheeler-Bennett on the other hand was only marginally involved. He was (to borrow a phrase from Professor D. C. Watt) 'the informed bystander, the witness at the accident, the anthropologist among the Tikopians'. What he did with unusual success was to combine the role of historian with that of observer rather than participant.

So far, however, Wheeler-Bennett had only produced his series of information reports which, although admirable for their purpose, gave no indication of the historian's power of handling narrative, analysis, and characterization. *Hindenburg, The Wooden Titan*, when it appeared in 1936, left no doubt. It was a big book about a big subject, the revival of German nationalism and the refusal to accept the loss of the War in 1918 as decisive. Vividly written and conveying a dramatic sense of what it was like to be present at the events described, it penetrated beneath the surface glitter of events to show the author's gift of historical interpretation and political judgement.

The second half of the book is less impressive than the first, partly because the author could not know (as he did when he wrote *The Nemesis of Power*) what was to follow—the greatest handicap of the contemporary historian when he comes too near to the present—partly because the narrative became congested with political detail. Moreover, Wheeler-Bennett was not able to reveal in more than general terms the sources on which he had drawn and which still give the book value. He had been able to record the direct testimony of several of the most important actors, but as he gave no references which could be checked, it was difficult to know how he was able to give quotations in direct speech and easy to assume that they were dramatic inventions by the author.

Ironically, Brüning who appeared as the hero of the book and on whose evidence much of the latter part was based, was anxious after the War to create a different impression and repudiate the version which he gave Wheeler-Bennett at the

time. Fortunately this was already on record and Brüning's efforts to rewrite history, as Wheeler-Bennett pointed out, 'only succeeded in presenting a far less favourable impression of the author than is justified or accurate.'¹

Before *The Wooden Titan* appeared, JWB was already at work collecting the material for a second book, *Brest-Litovsk, The Forgotten Peace* which most historians would probably agree in regarding as his finest piece of work—in the originality of the subject, the scope with which he treated it, the richness of the sources he unearthed, and the skill with which he used them to produce a book without a dull page. He had first become interested in the campaigns on the Eastern Front when reading Churchill's *The Unknown War*. (One result was his ability to draw Seeckt on the battle of Gorlice.) The research for his biography of Hindenburg—whose reputation was made by the Battle of Tannenberg—confirmed his view that the importance of the war in the East and even more of the peace treaties which ended it was far greater than was understood in the West. He was able to show convincingly that the terms imposed at Brest-Litovsk were the greatest blunder of German military-political diplomacy during the War, with incalculable consequences for the fate of the Bolshevik Revolution, the German attempt of March 1918 at a breakthrough in the West, the United States' decision to enter the war, and the future course of Russo-German relations.

Here was a historical plum ripe for the picking and JWB set to work to read everything he could by way of preparation for interviewing the chief actors. His persistence was rewarded with good luck. Not only was he able to talk at length to the three principal representatives of the Central Powers in the negotiations—Kühlmann, Hoffmann, and Czernin—but, with the help of the US Ambassador William Bullitt ('he likes Englishmen, but hates the English') and of another acquaintance from Geneva, Litvinov, then at the height of his reputation as Commissar for Foreign Affairs—he succeeded in penetrating the Soviet archives and seeing not just copies but the original documents, including Lenin's notes and comments, in the vaults of the Marx-Engels Institute.

More than that: arriving in Moscow in the summer of 1935 on the eve of the Great Purge, he was able to talk to the group of Old Bolsheviks who were to be its victims, amongst them

¹ JWB I, p. 136.

Bukharin, Borodin, Sokolnikov, Kamenev, and, most interesting of all, Karl Radek. Radek, who alone of the accused in the State Trials, succeeded in turning the tables on Vyshinsky, the Public Prosecutor, and arguing his way out of the death penalty, spent a whole day with Wheeler-Bennett at his dacha outside Moscow pouring out a non-stop stream of brilliant, witty, and malicious reminiscences not only of Brest-Litovsk but of his experiences in Berlin at the time of the Spartacist rising.

To secure an interview with the originator of 'National Bolshevism', before he was silenced for good was the sort of coup most historians only dream of; but Wheeler-Bennett was to pull off an even greater one two years later.

Trotsky, the incontestable star of the Brest-Litovsk negotiations and the most brilliant of the Bolshevik leaders, was living in exile in Mexico. In 1937, with an introduction from Max Eastman, JWB succeeded in getting past the defences of the villa outside Mexico City where three years later Trotsky was to be assassinated. His reception was friendly but Trotsky admitted that he had not thought about Brest-Litovsk for some time and asked to have his memory refreshed. As Wheeler-Bennett recounted the course of the negotiations, Trotsky started to pace the floor.

He plunged his hands into his abundant hair . . . as if cudgelling his brain to remembrance, and then it happened. In the middle of a sentence of mine, out came a torrent of reminiscence, justification, accusation and recrimination. He spoke in English, French, German, Russian and even Yiddish (the last two of which were incomprehensible to me) and it seemed as if I were submerged in a flood which had been dammed up for years awaiting release.

Fortunately, once the first tide had exhausted itself, Trotsky was willing to answer questions and asked Wheeler-Bennett for a further session on the following day, at which the Russian leader expressed his hatred and contempt for Stalin and as a parting gift gave JWB a signed copy of his *History of the Russian Revolution* and his book on the Brest-Litovsk negotiations, a rare collectors' piece.

The fact that no one else had been or will be able to interview the actors makes *The Forgotten Peace* virtually a primary source; especially as many of JWB's notes were destroyed when his house in Bolton Street was bombed during the War. But this apart, the insight he shows in his account of the negotiations

and in setting them in the historical perspective of German-Russian relations gives it qualities which stand up well forty years later in the light of what has happened since—including the Russo-German War of 1941-5—and of new research.¹

Although he continued to visit Europe annually, JWB wrote most of *The Forgotten Peace* in Virginia where he rented three houses in succession between 1936 and 1939. He was very much involved, however, in the Czech crisis of 1938 and travelled several times to Prague that summer. He had known President Masaryk and been a close friend of Jan Masaryk from the time the President's son came to London as Czech Minister in 1925. Other friends who were to provide invaluable evidence for WB's later study of Munich were Beneš and Stefan Osuský, the Czech Minister in Paris. But in 1938 JWB was more interested in trying to avert the tragic fate imposed on the Czechs at Munich, however much his instincts as a historian led him to keep a careful record of all he saw and heard. He was close to the group of dissident Tories led by Churchill which opposed the policy of appeasement and again acted as a 'convenience', travelling between London and Prague and doing everything he could to stiffen the Czech and, more important, the British resolve to stand firm.

JWB was present in the Commons when Chamberlain, instead of announcing some sort of ultimatum to Germany, as was generally expected, told the House of the invitation to Munich and his acceptance of it. The weeks that followed he described as the blackest period of his life. Searching for a way in which to express his feelings of anger, shame, and foreboding, he took the initiative in getting the Lord Mayor of London to open a relief fund for Czech refugees from the territories the British and French Governments had ceded to Hitler. In company with the Lord Mayor and Neill Malcolm, then League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, he flew again to Prague to organize the disbursement of the Fund. General Syrový, the hero of the Czechoslovak Legion's famous march across Siberia and Inspector-General of the Czech Army, had formed a government to carry out the terms of the Munich Agreement and Wheeler-Bennett and his companions appealed to him to delay compliance with the German demand

¹ JWB was delighted to learn after the War from General Sokolovsky that the Red Army had translated and published its own edition, taking care to omit the introduction.

for the return of the refugees. Their plea was met with contempt: 'Not fifteen days,' Syrový answered, 'not fifteen minutes. The Germans have asked for them and back they go.'

Turning to Wheeler-Bennett, he said:

'I told you in August that we were prepared to fight either alone or with Britain and France, and that we should win, but you would not allow us to do either. In this affair, messieurs, we have been willing to fight on the side of the angels, now we shall hunt with the wolves.'¹

Returning to the USA, Wheeler-Bennett was invited by President Roosevelt to spend a week-end at the White House and talk about what was likely to happen in Europe after Munich. JWB was now giving a regular seminar at the University of Virginia Law School on international affairs and accepted an invitation from a friend on the Faculty at Harvard, Bruce Hopper, to act as supervisor of a young man who was writing an MA thesis on the British policy of appeasement. The thesis was subsequently published under the title of *While England Slept* and its author, Jack Kennedy, was to invite JWB to pay a second visit to the White House when he became President in 1962.

JWB's plan after finishing *The Forgotten Peace* was to write a historical study of the American Civil War in which he retained a life-long interest. In particular he wanted to write about the Army of Northern Virginia but regretfully abandoned the scheme after being conducted over the battlefields by Douglas Freeman, who was then engaged on writing a four-volume biography of General Lee and whose knowledge of the subject persuaded Wheeler-Bennett, as it had John Buchan, that it would be wise to look elsewhere for a subject. He did not give up hope of producing something on the Civil War, perhaps a political history of the Confederacy,² but in the meantime he took up another long-harboured ambition, to write the life of the Kaiser.

John Wheeler-Bennett bore a certain physical resemblance to the Hohenzollerns which led to his being mistaken for the Kaiser's youngest son (Prince August Wilhelm) and to the persistent rumour (which he mentions only to deny in his memoirs) that he was an illegitimate son of the Kaiser. An invitation to Doorn, however, where the Kaiser had lived since the First World War was not easy to obtain, because his entourage

¹ JWB I, p. 144.

² See the three American Studies in *A Wreath to Clío* (1967).

intercepted the letters, and it was only through the personal intervention of the Kaiser's grandson, Prince Friedrich of Prussia, that JWB and his friend Robert Bruce Lockhart were invited to come and stay in the middle of August. Convinced that war was imminent, Wheeler-Bennett did not hesitate in taking the last chance he was likely to get of talking to the 80-year-old ex-emperor.

They were well received and JWB was gratified by the Kaiser's remark that he had given the only true and accurate account of what happened at Spa in November 1918 when Hindenburg had left it to Groener to tell the Kaiser that he no longer enjoyed the confidence of the German Army. (He refrained out of tact from telling the Kaiser that he had got it all from Groener.) He found the Kaiser willing to talk freely on any subject, turning for confirmation when he needed it to a row of volumes bound in red morocco which contained his diaries.

When the time came to say farewell, the Kaiser gave each of his visitors a signed photograph. The following morning, before they left, he sent for JWB to come and see him alone.

I found him sitting up in bed, looking very pink and clean with his hair brushed up into a plume, which gave him the appearance of an elderly cockatoo. He wore a silk nightshirt, with the imperial Prussian eagle embroidered in black silk on the pocket.

His greeting was cordial. He took me by the hand and said how much he had enjoyed our talks. 'Come back again and see me next summer,' he said gaily, 'and we'll talk some more.' Then he paused and a look of great sadness came into his face. He said: 'No, you won't be able to, because the machine is running away with *him* as it ran away with *me*.'

Ten days later the Second World War began with the German invasion of Poland. The Kaiser died in 1941 and Wheeler-Bennett's first concern when the War was over was to return to Doorn and find out what had happened to his diaries. They were not there and, although JWB traced them to Berlin, he failed to find them in the chaos of Germany after the surrender. The life remained unwritten.

For a man who had all the makings of a soldier, it was a bitter disappointment that, having missed service in the First World War because he was too young, he should have missed it in the Second as well because of the poor health which dogged him all his life. Good use was made of his talents, but in political warfare and propaganda, and for most of the War in the United States where, to begin with he served as PA to the new

Ambassador, Lord Lothian, with a commission to act as his 'eyes and ears' in the country at large. Between the beginning of the War and Pearl Harbor, 27 months later, he travelled the length and breadth of the United States and spoke in 37 of its 48 states. The battle to win over American opinion was vital although not always recognized as such by Government departments in London. With Aubrey Morgan JWB made a major contribution in establishing the British Information Services in New York. When Robert Bruce Lockhart recruited him for the body variously known as the Political Warfare Executive and the Political Intelligence Department (of the FO), he returned again to the USA with the Political Warfare Mission and established working relations with the American Office of War Information. In this way he acquired a double experience, in Whitehall and Washington, of the guerrilla warfare which was waged between the different agencies involved in propaganda, intelligence, and secret operations.

JWB's knowledge of Europe was employed in contacts with the political exiles already jockeying for position in Washington and New York (among them Brüning) and with Adam von Trott as a representative of the German Resistance. It was not, however, until the end of 1943 that his wish to get back to London was allowed and, owing to a serious illness, not until 8 May 1944 that he reported for duty with PID on the upper floors of Bush House¹ with a roving commission as European Adviser. From this he progressed to become PID's representative in the work of the tripartite European Advisory Commission and on the staff of the British Political Adviser at SHAEF (Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force), first in Bushy Park, and from September 1944 outside Paris. By then he had become Assistant Director General responsible directly to Bruce Lockhart, and very much concerned in all these capacities with the future of Germany.

Wheeler-Bennett's views on this subject, and his advice, were clear-cut; they were also—and have remained—unacceptable to those, whether on the Allied or the German side, who believed the demand for Unconditional Surrender wrong and urged that no opportunity for a compromise peace should be missed. Without embarking on that argument, three things

¹ For those who worked in Bush House there was a crucial difference between the upper floors where PID laid down policy and the lower floors (mostly in the cellars) where the BBC's European Services maintained their own form of resistance movement. The author was on the lower floors.

may be said. First, John Wheeler-Bennett's views were the product not only of many years of research and reflection on 'the German problem' but of longer and closer first-hand acquaintance with German politics and German politicians and soldiers (over more than twenty years) than any other Englishman could claim. Second, no Englishman had worked harder to secure greater understanding and support abroad for the hard-pressed German Government *before* Hitler came to power. Third, the further research and reflection involved in producing, after the War, three more major works on Germany did not lead him to change his views.

What were these views? JWB summarized them himself in the second volume of his memoirs published in 1975, fifty years after he had first interested himself in German affairs:

I had always emphasised that we should never make promises to the German Resistance. This had been the fatal mistake in November 1918 when the correspondence between President Wilson and the German Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, preliminary to a German surrender, had been subsequently interpreted as a 'Pre-Armistice Agreement', by which, the Germans claimed, an understanding had been reached for far more lenient peace terms than were ultimately imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. Almost all German Chancellors from Ebert to Hitler had made play with this thesis, and it seemed to me vital that there should be no similar misunderstanding or misinterpretation this time.¹

Remembering the 'Stab in the Back' myth and the use which had been made of it, Wheeler-Bennett argued that, the second time, the German Army must not only be defeated in the field but that this must be so clear and unambiguous a defeat that no one could question the fact.

For that reason, JWB insisted even before the War that, while every encouragement should be given to any Germans prepared to overthrow the Hitler regime, no promises should be made to them, of the sort which the various emissaries of the Resistance groups, like Adam von Trott, sought to obtain. They had to act on their own, a view in which JWB was strengthened by the belief (expressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom he had admired since the days of his pastorate at the Lutheran Church in London)² that 'their action must be considered as an act of repentance'. This was a view not so far

¹ JWB II, p. 199.

² 'I was convinced that I was in the company of a saint, and a saint of the most practical and modern pattern.' JWB III, p. 101.

from that of Henning von Treschkow who, after the failure of the 20 July plot, set out to seek death on the Eastern Front with the words:

Just as God promised Abraham that He would spare Sodom if only ten just men could be found in the city, I have also reason to hope that, for our sake, he will not destroy Germany. No one among us can complain about his death, for whoever joined our ranks put on the poisoned shirt of Nessus. A man's moral worth is established only at the point where he is prepared to give his life for his convictions.

For men like Bonhoeffer and Treschkow, John Wheeler-Bennett had unstinted admiration, but the view which they shared, that resistance to Hitler was an act of moral atonement was not one which the majority even of those involved in the Resistance would probably have accepted. It was no more acceptable to those on the Allied side who argued that to secure the overthrow of Hitler was a matter of political expediency, not of Christian morality, and that anything which would shorten the war was desirable.

The failure of the attempted coup in July 1944 settled the matter practically, but JWB refused to conceal his opinion that 'in the long run it was a good thing that the coup had failed'.

It was regrettable that so many 'good Germans', some of whom I had known personally, and who might have played a useful part in a new Germany, had sacrificed their lives in vain, but had they succeeded, the complications would have been incalculable. At once there would have arisen rival schools of thought in both Britain and America advocating a 'soft' against a 'hard' peace with the New Germany, which would have missed no chance of playing one off against the other. And the inevitable clash with the Soviet Union would have produced its own problems. On the whole, I said, I believed that things were better as they were and that the war should end with the unconditional surrender of the Third Reich.¹

When the War ended, JWB was forty-three, anxious to make a marriage which had been delayed by the War; to recover his health and to settle down in his own country in which, with the exception of not much more than a year during the War, he had not spent six consecutive months for over twenty years. He refused an invitation to remain in the FO and any other offer which would interfere with the two books which he wanted to write, the first on the Munich crisis, the second on the 20 July conspiracy to kill Hitler.

¹ JWB II, p. 200.

John and Ruth Wheeler-Bennett made their home in Garsington Manor, an Elizabethan manor house a few miles from Oxford, which had earned a place in English literary history as the home in the 1920s of Lady Ottoline Morrell. Its new owners after the War made it a place to which invitations were once again eagerly accepted, and where the beauty of the setting was matched by their gifts as hosts.

Oxford was a good place for JWB to be near. At that time there was no other university in the UK where so many historians, returning from the War, were interested in exploring the possibilities of contemporary history, among them A. J. P. Taylor (with whom the author founded the Oxford Recent History Group), Hugh Trevor-Roper, Bill Deakin, Robert Blake, Keith Hancock, the Seton-Watson brothers, Hugh and Christopher, and James Joll. This was congenial company for JWB who was soon persuaded by Isaiah Berlin to undertake some teaching for New College. Later, when Bill Deakin started St. Antony's College and made it an international centre for the study of twentieth-century history, JWB became one of its first Fellows and made generous gifts to its library.

But his immediate purpose was to secure additional material for the two books he was bent on writing. One obvious source was offered by the Nuremberg Trials which produced the greatest windfall of documents that historians have ever had so soon after the event, and thereby gave a decisive impetus to the establishment of contemporary history as an accepted field of historical study. JWB was appointed to the staff of the British Prosecutor, Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, who welcomed with open arms an assistant so well acquainted with the period of German history with which the Court was concerned. His first appearance in the courtroom at once attracted the attention of the defendants, several of whom, including Papen, Schacht, and Neurath, were well known to JWB. His own feeling, he records, was one of supreme satisfaction at seeing the Nazi leaders and their accomplices brought to book at last. His view remained that it was unthinkable these men should not be punished and that the choice lay between summary court martial followed by a firing squad or a court of law. Despite its imperfections, he preferred the latter which distinguished sufficiently between degrees of guilt to condemn only eleven of the defendants to death and to acquit and discharge three, Papen, Fritzsche, and Schacht—the last of whom had told Airey Neave when the latter served the indictment on him: 'You can't hang a banker.'

The documents used in the Nuremberg Trials (and at once made accessible in print) were only a part of the great haul of German archives finally assembled in Marburg. These formed the basis of the Anglo-US project (joined by the French in 1947 and eventually taken over by the Germans, still on an international basis) for the publication of the German documents on foreign policy between 1918 and 1945. JWB was appointed as the original British editor in chief of the project, although he stipulated that he should be allowed first to finish his book on Munich.

This appeared in 1948 as *Munich: Prologue to Tragedy*, and once again JWB pulled off a coup in the documentation. Jan Masaryk had become Foreign Minister after his return to Prague and opened the Czech archives to him. These, together with the German material gathered at Nuremberg, as well as that knowledge of the actors—including Beneš, a particularly important source—which he regarded as essential to the interpretation of the documents, and his own experiences in London, Paris, and Prague during 1938–9, gave him advantages which no other historian could equal. He matched them with a care in the construction of the book, an accomplished ease of writing and firm but balanced judgement which won the greatest acclaim of any of his published works.

If *The Forgotten Peace* has lasted better, this is because the new material relating to Brest-Litovsk is relatively small when compared with that dealing with Munich which has become available from the British Foreign Office, the German Documents project and a large number of memoirs. This has filled in a great many details and attracted younger historians eager to play a revisionist role. JWB read them but was not shaken in his views. Granted the lack of preparations on the British side, the collapse of French nerve and the uncertainty of Russia's intentions, he believed Chamberlain had no choice but to do as he did. But this did not alter the fact that the British and French sacrificed the Czechs in order to save their own skins, and WB refused to take any comfort from the argument that thereby they saved the Czechs from the even worse fate of their other allies, the Poles, a year later.

In reality it was the Czechs who saved us; for, had President Beneš elected to fight with Russian support and thus precipitate an Eastern European War, it is impossible to believe that Britain and France could have kept aloof, however reluctantly they might have been dragged into participation.

Whether this would have been better than what actually happened, with a year gained by the British and French, and almost three years by the Russians; whether Hitler would have climbed down, or fought and been defeated—without the destruction of the Second World War—if the British and French had stood firm in 1938, and what the Russians would have done: these are questions, as JWB recognized, on which argument will continue and is unlikely ever to be settled by the discovery of new documents. His own book still remains the best account given by an historian of the generation who lived through the events of 1938 and enjoyed the advantage, not capable of being repeated, of observing these at first hand and discussing them with the actors both at the time and subsequently.

The same year, 1948, that *Munich* was published Wheeler-Bennett turned down, with great regret, an invitation to accompany Sir Oliver Franks to Washington as Counsellor of Embassy in a crucial period of Anglo-US relations marked by the Berlin airlift, the negotiation of NATO, and the final settlement with Germany. He chose instead to stick to his last as an historian and get on with what was to be both his biggest and most controversial book, *The Nemesis of Power*. JWB's original intention had been to produce a book about the 20 July plot, but he found he had to explain so much in the way of preliminaries that he was drawn into writing the history of the German Army in politics from its defeat in November 1918 to its capitulation in May 1945. This was a major historical theme and one particularly well suited to his experience and talents.

The Nemesis of Power suffers from the fact that it is really two books—the first a history of the German Resistance, the second a history of the German Army in politics—each on a different scale and each at times getting in the other's way. None the less it is a rich and fascinating work, political history in the grand manner, reminiscent of Churchill, full of colour and personalities, and shaped with a dramatist's sense to illustrate the theme from Greek tragedy announced in the title. Into it JWB poured thirty years' familiarity with German politics and the German officer corps. A number of the civilian conspirators had been in touch with him before the plot—Goerdeler and Adam von Trott in the USA, von Moltke in Oxford, the Kordt brothers and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in London and

Berlin—and he sought out other survivors of the Resistance as witnesses. Amongst these were two who had been prepared to sacrifice their lives to kill Hitler, Rudolf von Gersdorf and Axel von dem Bussche; Otto John; Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia, who was thought of by many as the future sovereign of a new Germany, and Jacob Kaiser, named as Vice-Chancellor in the Provisional Government.

I was engaged at the time in writing my own version of these events in *Hitler, A Study in Tyranny*, and frequently discussed them with JWB. I mention this in order to record, as many others could, his extraordinary generosity in sharing everything he came across, despite the fact, which I pointed out with some embarrassment, that my book was likely to be published first. He brushed this aside as irrelevant and continued to put in my way unpublished material which any other historian would have felt it entirely legitimate to keep for his own use. Such was John Wheeler-Bennett's practice of friendship.

His book, published in 1953, was well received in Britain, but led to a storm of controversy in Germany. Part of this was due to the strong judgements which the author expressed about the part played by individuals in the history he related, not only those which were critical but in a number of cases (e.g. Generals Seeckt and Groener) judgements which were regarded as too favourable. A second cause of offence was the shock, especially to the older generation of historians, of seeing the political record of the German Army's leaders laid bare and a large share of the blame placed on the *Generalität* for the appalling cost to Germany no less than to Europe of the failure to stop Hitler from overriding any limits to his power and plunging Germany and Europe into an unnecessary war. Finally, there were those like the historian Hans Rothfels who resented JWB's critical evaluation of the Resistance, in which they saw not only a moral defence for 'the other Germany' but a basis for the political argument that, if the Western Powers (with such advisers as John Wheeler-Bennett) had not refused to give encouragement to the Resistance before 1940, Hitler could have been overthrown and a second world war avoided. This line of argument was continued by the assertion that, if the Allies had not adopted the policy of unconditional surrender, the war could have been shortened by a compromise peace and the great destruction of the final year (including the advance of the Red Army into Central Europe) averted. JWB remained unconvinced that there was any real substance in the claim

that the German Army would have acted to remove Hitler if the British and French had not capitulated at Munich (a 'Stab in the Front' this time!), and stuck to his belief that unconditional surrender represented the only guarantee against a revival of German nationalism by making clear beyond any doubt the defeat of the German Army with no blurring of the fact by a compromise peace.

To the present writer, it appears that there may have been grounds in particular cases for criticizing the forthrightness of JWB's judgements on individuals; and that the continuing historical debate has certainly put German responsibility for the Second World War into a different context. Some of the detail of the book also required revision in the light of new evidence and efforts were made to do this in a revised edition published in 1963. None the less these faults—which are no more than anyone would expect to appear twenty-five years after the publication of a large and controversial book on recent history—do not invalidate Wheeler-Bennett's broad historical judgement on the German Army's share of the responsibility for what happened in Germany between 1918 and 1945 and the cost in unparalleled suffering and loss of life, to Germans as well as others.

In recent years, German military historians, such as Wilhelm Deist and Michael Geyer, have turned up much new material confirming that the rearmament plans of the Reichswehr leadership were of central importance to the development of German policy both before and after Hitler came to power. The continuities in German military and foreign policy between 1914 and 1939 have in fact become much more widely accepted by German historians since *The Nemesis of Power* was published.

Similarly the passage of time has confirmed Wheeler-Bennett's view of the mixed character of the German resistance which not only failed to stop Hitler but contained, besides men of the highest integrity and courage, others whose object was to rescue their country from the consequences of a war about which they had felt few doubts as long as it was successful.

Wheeler-Bennett had now published four large-scale studies on different episodes in the defeat, rebirth, and destruction of German power. *The Nemesis of Power* was not his last word on the subject. Two shorter studies, one which he had given as the Leslie Stephen Lecture at Cambridge in 1955 under the title 'Three Episodes in the Life of Kaiser Wilhelm II', and an essay

on Groener and Ludendorff, 'Men of Tragic Duty', are reprinted in *A Wreath to Clio*, a collection of occasional pieces published in 1967. And three years later he rounded off the story in a fifth volume *The Semblance of Peace*. But between the publication of *The Nemesis of Power* in 1953 and 1964 he turned aside from recent German to recent English history, in order to write the official life of George VI.

No invitation could have given him more pleasure. He had been an enthusiastic monarchist all his life, indefatigably 'collecting' members of every royal house in Europe (including Frau Katherina Schrott, the friend of the Emperor Franz Josef) and acquiring in the process an inexhaustible knowledge of family relationships, tragedies, and scandals, particularly about the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs. He had the instincts of a courtier as well as an officer, and understood the restricted and inhibiting world in which royal personages were required to live, and could talk to them as human beings. No one was better suited to become a royal biographer, a profession, he once remarked, which was virtually as old as monarchy itself.

The tablets of Babylon, the papyri of Egypt and large portions of the Old Testament were among our progenitors; Plutarch, Suetonius, Voltaire and Carlyle, even Shakespeare and Marlowe were of our number.¹

With the same zest which had led him to visit Trotsky in Mexico and Radek in Moscow, JWB now set about interviewing more than 200 people (in addition to members of the Royal Family) in order to learn about the man who had been unexpectedly made King by the abdication of Edward VIII and who had won everyone's respect by the sense of duty with which he filled a role as unwelcome as it was unsought. The fact that both the King and his biographer had suffered from a crippling stammer and been cured by the same specialist, Lionel Logue, gave JWB a strong feeling of sympathy with the man he was writing about. JWB spent six years in all on writing the King's life, using the opportunity to enlarge his acquaintance with other royal figures who had known George VI. Amongst them were Queen Wilhelmina, King Haakon, King George of Greece, and two exiled kings, Peter of Yugoslavia and Michael of Rumania.

The book does not compare in dramatic interest with his earlier works nor in illumination of the institution of monarchy with Harold Nicolson's *George V*, but JWB made the most of

¹ JWB III, p. 141.

a subject the scope and interest of which were limited. The Queen was delighted with the result and knighted her father's biographer, appointing him to the Royal Victorian Order, reserved for those who have rendered special services to the Royal Family.¹ A week later, to Sir John's immense pleasure, she created the new post of Historical Adviser to the Royal Archives and appointed him as the first incumbent.

He did not look back with the same pleasure on another English biography which he wrote, the life of Lord Waverley, better known as Sir John Anderson (1962). There was no doubt that Anderson had been a great servant of the State, but Churchill (who left him to run the domestic affairs of the country during wartime through the Lord President's Committee) summed up the impression he produced in the phrase 'the automatic pilot'. The single reference in JWB's autobiography to the book he wrote about Anderson comes in a paragraph in which he describes a wartime lunch at which they sat next to each other. His description of that occasion — 'it was hard going' — might be applied to the writing of Anderson's life. Desperately searching for a subject which might elicit any response, JWB turned to the Anderson shelters which (on a wartime visit from the USA) he found filling the back-gardens of all the houses along the railway as a protection against air raids. He was struck with the number of cases in which the householders had covered them with earth and proceeded to grow marrows on them. He described this phenomenon to Sir John as an illustration of the Englishman's love of gardening and gift for improvisation. The latter took some minutes to digest a fact apparently unknown to him and then replied: 'I had not intended the shelters for the cultivation of vegetables.'² The difficulties he encountered on this occasion should perhaps have been a warning to JWB in accepting the invitation to write Anderson's life.

It was recent German, not English, history which fascinated Wheeler-Bennett and he had still one more major book to write to round off the story. The suggestion came from Harold Macmillan, a welcome and frequent visitor to Garsington as Chancellor of Oxford: 'Why don't you write the history of the political settlement after the Second World War?' JWB did not feel that, with indifferent health, he could face the research

¹ He was promoted to Knight Grand Cross in the same Order on 16 March 1974.

² JWB II, pp. 102-3.

involved on his own and took as partner A. J. Nicholls, a young Research Fellow of St. Antony's who had already helped in revising the second edition of *The Nemesis of Power*. The partnership was a happy one and together they produced a study which followed the development of the peace settlement through the wartime discussions—including those in the European Advisory Committee to which JWB had been attached—down to the acceptance of the division of Europe and Germany with the formation of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. As before, JWB not only made use of documents, personal papers, and memoirs, but of his wide acquaintance among the actors in Britain and the USA and of his post-war visits to Berlin and Western Germany.

The Semblance of Peace, although a well-constructed and well-documented study, did not attract the same interest as the earlier books on Germany. The revisionist historians in the United States were already creating a radically different version of American policy and the origins of the Cold War which JWB ignored, and was criticized for not answering. In 1970 this was a more serious ground for criticism than it appears to be in 1980; by now American historians have themselves subjected the work of the earlier generation of revisionists to a searching examination and gone some way to bring the revisionist and the orthodox versions within a common focus. This was a task calling for a training and talents which JWB was the first to admit he did not possess. On the other hand, it can be argued that the most impressive thing about *The Semblance of Peace* is that, while accepting and working within the assumptions on which the British and American governments had proceeded, the authors did not produce an official apologia but a highly critical account, particularly of American policy.

John Wheeler-Bennett paid his last visit to Berlin on 6 July 1948. He was convinced that he would not come again and set out to make a final tour of a city he had known so well. He ended by walking in the park which surrounds the Hohenzollern mausoleum at Charlottenburg and found it deserted except for two little girls having a dolls' tea-party on the steps. When he asked if there was a way in, they directed him to the back where a bomb had damaged the door. Inside the half-lit vault he found the coffins of the Prussian kings and queens lying forgotten in their former capital, while outside the city prepared for the blockade which the Russians were about to impose on it. For the first time, he wrote, he felt admiration

for the inhabitants of a city he had never liked, and sensed that a new spirit was being born, very different from that of the Germany he had written about, a spirit represented by the courageous mayor, Ernst Reuter, whose resistance the Communists could not break. The following year JWB entertained him at Garsington, seeing in him a man who, if he had not died prematurely, might well have become Adenauer's successor.

After finishing *The Semblance of Peace*, JWB contented himself with writing his autobiography on which this memoir has drawn heavily. His health was becoming worse and he had to follow a strict regime which he did entirely without complaint or ostentation. In introducing the final volume of his memoirs, published after JWB's death, his friend over many years, Harold Macmillan, regretted that they were too discreet. The first volume at least,¹ in which he recalls his experiences in Europe between the Wars, is full of interest, if only for the light it throws on the formative experiences of the historian. It is also very readable. But it is not difficult to see what Macmillan means. The printed page fails to convey—as it does in the case of Mr Macmillan himself—the qualities of personality which won John Wheeler-Bennett the devotion of so many friends, including in Macmillan's phrase 'the girl behind the counter and the man behind the bar'.

When he came into our publishing office he brought with him an atmosphere of kindness which was felt by all with whom he had to deal.²

In 1969 I went to see him in New York where he had been invited as Visiting Professor by a former pupil, Jim Hester, now President of New York University. I tracked him down on the fourteenth floor of a nondescript office building in one of the shabbier streets of Manhattan. The room he occupied had barely room for two chairs and a desk, but the latter was covered with a dozen signed portraits, from the Queen Mother and the Kaiser to Trotsky and President Kennedy—a setting perfectly conveyed by Osbert Lancaster's drawing on the jacket of *Knaves, Fools and Heroes*. The familiar silver-topped stick stood in the corner, the buttonhole was in place and, above all, there was the warmth of the welcome.

¹ *Knaves, Fools and Heroes* (1974).

² Foreword to JWB III.

Although JWB always deprecated any suggestion that he was an 'academic' he was an inspiring as well as by then an experienced teacher. He used his great store of knowledge not to overwhelm but to encourage his students, and there are many former graduate students to testify to the debt they owe him.

If I needed confirmation of his gifts with young people I received it that day in NYU. I had great difficulty in finding JWB's room and asked directions of several young people, as strangely accoutred and sullen in manner as American students could be in that troubled period. The moment they grasped, however, for whom I was looking, their faces lit up and they assured me with enthusiasm that he was 'a great guy'. He was a phenomenon right outside their experience, but they responded at once to a quality which they could not identify but instinctively recognized.

Trying to pin down his own impressions, Mr Macmillan writes of his distinguished, if strangely un-English appearance, the military bearing of a man who had been a fine horseman and would have loved to be a soldier, his impeccable, if old-fashioned, dress and manners which matched an unfailing courtesy. He had the gift of enchantment, of raising the level of enjoyment and interest in any group he joined. His courage and strength of character were put to the test by the indifferent health from which he suffered throughout his life and the incurable disease from which he died, disguising the pain he suffered with a cheerful manner to the end. Mr Macmillan, no mean judge, described his conversation as memorable and lamented the lack of a Boswell. He had few equals as a raconteur, using anecdote not only to entertain but to illuminate a character or relationship. 'How much, for instance, one learns of both Queen Victoria and Bismarck from the German statesman's four words: "She makes me schweat".'

Those who know the author only from his books will, alas, have little idea of the qualities of a personality which will be remembered and loved as long as any of his friends survive. On the other hand, few of those who knew him, even as close friends, realized how much hard work, discipline, and determination he put into the research for and writing of his books. He was the last man to parade his learning, which was based upon unusually wide reading, a retentive memory (and great discretion) coupled with a passion for collecting information and a flair for uncovering unpublished documents. As well, if not better, informed about the period of European history in

which he was interested as any living historian, he disclaimed professional status, preferring to retain that of the amateur who could match or beat the professionals at their own game. He remained the gentleman-rider turned scholar, even when the professionals, in recognition of his work as an historian, elected him a Fellow of the Academy. That this gave him pleasure is certain, but among all his other honours it is the one not mentioned in his autobiography: it did not fit his picture of himself.

Wheeler-Bennett's view of history, like everyone else's, was a limited one. His work can legitimately be criticized for its concentration on the personal, immediate and dramatic elements in politics and for its neglect of the larger, more impersonal, long-term social and economic factors which have interested a newer generation of historians.

The art of narrative in which he excelled makes little appeal to those whose approach to history is analytical and who look disparagingly on *l'histoire événementielle*. Others while appreciating the skill Wheeler-Bennett showed in characterization and the sense of immediacy which he conveyed, point to the dangers of relying on oral sources, and feel that he was inclined to let his use of documents be too much influenced by what the witnesses he interrogated led him to believe had happened.

These criticisms do not, however, reduce the role which John Wheeler-Bennett played as a pioneer in at least three directions.

First his work leading up to the establishment of the Information Department at Chatham House, and the publication of the annual *Documents on International Affairs*, made an important contribution to the teaching and the serious study of the new subject of international relations.

He extended this activity into another new field, that of contemporary history, in which again he was a pioneer. Contemporary history achieved a breakthrough after the war thanks not only to the unprecedented opening of the German archives but to the fact that so many historians had been forced out of familiar ruts during the war into direct participation in war, political warfare or administration. Striking examples of what this could produce are the great medievalist Marc Bloch's *Strange Defeat*, the fruits of his observation as a staff officer during the campaign of 1940; Hugh Trevor-Roper's *The Last Days of Hitler*; and Bill Deakin's account of his service with Tito's partisans, *The Embattled Mountain*.

JWB, however, had not waited for the war: twenty years before, he set out to secure access to those who were involved in politics at the top and cultivated their acquaintance, not in order to advance a political career for himself (though the opportunity of influence through gathering information, acting as a channel for communication and providing advice was always in his mind), nor to secure a journalistic coup, but to discover and eventually record what was going on. This was an unusual training for an historian but was almost ideal for someone with JWB's gifts, when combined with his interest in the pursuit and study of documents.

Finally, long before projects in recording oral history were set up, JWB was a pioneer in showing what could be done in the way of collecting and using oral evidence, and this in relation to one of the most important and controversial historical themes of the first half of the twentieth century, the German bid for the mastery of Europe.

Anyone working in the field of recent history has to accept that what he writes is still more provisional, subject to revision and even to discard, than is true of all historical study. I believe, however, that the group of books which Wheeler-Bennett devoted to German history will continue to be of interest to later historians, for at least two reasons. The first is because they represent a coherent view developed from first-hand observation and knowledge of the events and actors over many years, thus qualifying as an important contemporary source. The second is that, thanks to the care he took to seek out and talk to the principal actors, sometimes informally over a period of time (as in the case of Brüning or Beneš), sometimes in special interviews (as in the case of Trotsky and the Kaiser), he was able to incorporate much additional source material which cannot be found elsewhere or reduplicated.

In the final volume of his autobiography John Wheeler-Bennett discusses which period of history he would most have liked to live in other than his own. After considering Virginia before the Civil War and deciding that, if it was to be for the whole of his life, this would have been his first choice—provided he could have died comfortably before 1860—he turned to the date and place he would have chosen for a short visit. The answer was Europe in 1867, in particular Paris in the year of the International Exhibition and Budapest and Vienna at the moment when the Hapsburg Empire was being transformed

into the Dual Monarchy. As he himself said, such choices are often revealing of our inner selves.

In the final decade of his life, the feeling of regret for the vanishing world in which he had lived as a child and young man became much stronger. With the support of a happy marriage, Christian beliefs, and deep loyalties to friends and institutions, he continued to present a brave and unruffled appearance to the world. But, although he rarely gave expression to it, preferring to keep that lightness of tone which was an essential part of his style of behaviour, he felt himself to be a survivor, steadfastly adhering to a set of values and a code of conduct which no longer had currency in a violent and disordered world.

In the epilogue to the last volume of his autobiography published after his death, he quoted the remark of the Duke of Wellington when, in the course of one of the brief lulls during the Battle of Waterloo, he noticed an act of gallantry in the French lines where the wounded were being evacuated, and raised his cocked hat in recognition. 'Whom are you saluting, Duke?' asked one of his entourage. 'I salute the courage and devotion of an age that is no longer ours', was his reply.

In the preface to the same volume, Harold Macmillan wrote: 'He will long be remembered as a man who in this modern world of scepticism and disillusion retained all his loyalties and enthusiasms. In this sense, perhaps, he was a true romantic.'

These two remarks, one chosen by himself, the other made by the friend who in style and outlook perhaps came closest to him, may serve as the epitaph of one who combined, with a success few have equalled in our time, the traditional virtues of the gentleman and the scholar—in that order.

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