

DE GAULLE, Bernard Ledwidge. (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1982, 418 pages)

Strangely enough, the most recent and complete biographies so far published on three of the more important and influential figures of literature and politics in France over the past fifty years — Céline, Camus and de Gaulle — have not been written in French, but in English. The reason for this anomaly stems from the fact that these three men are still politically controversial in France, making it difficult for a French biographer to be completely objective. Céline is controversial for his collaboration with the Vichy régime. Camus, torn apart by the Algerian war, was criticized by both the liberals and the conservatives for not taking sides publicly during the conflict. Finally, many French people still resent the way in which de Gaulle ended the Algerian war.

Bernard Ledwidge served as Minister at the British embassy in Paris during de Gaulle's last four years a President of the Fifth Republic. Therefore, he had first hand knowledge of de Gaulle, whom he met with several times. Thanks to the author's access to previously unpublished American and British documents and interviews with former officials, including diplomats and persons close to the General, we have a well-documented biography in which Ledwidge does not hide his admiration for de Gaulle. He describes both the man and the statesman, who twice managed to rescue his nation — the first time from the defeat of World War II and the second time from the threat of civil war during the Algerian conflict.

De Gaulle had no doubt that his destiny was to play a major role in the history of France. He left his mark wherever he went, as a cadet at Saint Cyr, as a prisoner of war, after being wounded twice during the First World War, (where his companions used to call him "le connétable"), and as a captain at the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre where he argued "in favor of a free offensive use of tank units against the official thesis that tanks could not operate independently of infantry." In all of these guises he showed a lack of patience for mediocrity. This was a characteristic which he would demonstrate all his life, and which was regarded by certain of his colleagues as arrogance. It nearly brought an end to his military career. He was rescued by Marshal Pétain, the hero of Verdun, whose protégé he had become. This was the same Pétain who condemned de Gaulle to death for treason after his departure for England in 1940. The intriguing relationship between the two men is well analyzed by Ledwidge, as is the complex relationship between de Gaulle and Churchill.

The role de Gaulle played during the Second World War is rather well known. However, Mr. Ledwidge emphasizes the formidable obstacles that de Gaulle had to surmount in order to impose himself, through stubbornness and shrewd political manipulations, as the head of "La France Libre." In order to achieve this, he had to deal not only with some opposition within the French Resistance, but also with the Allies — above all, the hostility of Franklin D. Roosevelt. For the readers who have not lived through that period, it is perhaps difficult to grasp what "l'appel du 18 juin" (reproduced in the chapter "De Gaulle Assumes France") meant for the people who heard it for the first time. It gave the French hope, after a humiliating defeat, to hear the voice of this unknown general, broadcasting from the BBC, telling them "whatever happens, the flame of French resistance must not and will not be extinguished."

De Gaulle left the government in January 1946 disgusted by the squabbling among the politicians. He started what he called “la traversée du désert” until he came back to power in 1958. He returned to save France from a civil war, grant independence to Algeria and the other African colonies, and create a new constitution for his country, which marked the beginning of the Fifth Republic. Mr. Ledwidge seems more at ease with this second part of the biography (chapters 28 to 45), no doubt because he personally knew some of the protagonists. He recounts vividly how de Gaulle returned to power after the previous governments had been unable to deal with the Algerian rebellion (F.L.N.), thus bringing France to the brink of civil war. He came back on his own terms, that is to say, through a new constitution, approved by a referendum, and creating his office as President of the Republic to be elected for seven years and holding executive powers, whereas before it was the prime minister who was the head of the government.

De Gaulle was the only person who had enough prestige to give independence to Algeria without being called a traitor and accused of selling France. (Algeria was not considered to be a colony at the time, but a part of metropolitan France, containing one and a half million French inhabitants.) For the General who identified himself with France, it took some courage to face the reality: the staggering emotional and financial price of keeping an army in Algeria, even if the war had been more or less won on the terrain. The way he succeeded to end the Algerian conflict is a masterpiece of political realism, cunning, and firmness. He managed to keep every one off balance — the French settlers, officers, and politicians who wanted to keep Algeria French, and the liberals who did not believe he could or would grant independence to Algeria. After the Evian Accord in March 1962, de Gaulle was free to launch his economic program and restore the image of France on the international scene.

Mr. Ledwidge next describes the curious episode of de Gaulle's trip to Canada. His speech ending with “vive le Québec libre” is considered to have been a big political blunder, yet it perfectly fits the character of this man. A photograph in the book illustrates his whole attitude. De Gaulle is standing in an open limousine, dressed in his military uniform, smiling and happy, responding to the ovation of the crowd. Next to him is Prime Minister Johnson of Quebec in civilian clothing, readjusting his tie, and looking very tense and out of place.

Next to this photo is another one showing the barricades in the Latin Quarter during May 1968. It is ironic that de Gaulle, the man who stood his ground against the Allies during World War II, outmaneuvered the right wing extremists during the Algerian war, and escaped several attempts of assassination, would finally be defeated by a student rebellion. During the middle of the student and worker uprisings which paralyzed France for three months, de Gaulle paid a visit to General Massu, commander of the French troops in Germany. Until now the motive for this trip has been rather mysterious. Mr. Ledwidge shows clearly that de Gaulle lost control of the situation for the first time. The first words to his friend — “C'est foutu Massu” (“It's finished Massu”) — summarize his tragic downfall.

Regardless of their varying political opinions, the French are fascinated by the amazing sense of “mise en scène” of “le grand Charles” and his mastery of the French language. His speeches were both political and literary masterpieces. Some passages of his “Mémoires” will undoubtedly appear in literary anthologies. Mr.

Ledwidge's book is not only a biography, but also a testimonial to the man who is already a legend.

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