

A Complex Fate: William L. Shirer and the American Century

Jeff Nichols

University of Illinois at Chicago

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2016 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Nichols, Jeff. "A Complex Fate: William L. Shirer and the American Century." *The Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 192-193.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12296>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

the planet. I am less pessimistic and less willing to admit the virtues of history as a predictor.

Sometimes a book can be better at being provocative than being right. *Inherit the Holy Mountain* can be useful to both environmental and religious historians—to the former in tracing religious roots of environmentalism and to the latter in suggesting that there may be many connections between denominations and American culture that are not yet fully explored.

A Complex Fate: William L. Shirer and the American Century, by Ken Cuthbertson. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. xxviii, 548 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Jeff Nichols is a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research has included investigating the role of newspapers in wartime Chicago.

Just weeks after graduating from Coe College in 1925, William L. Shirer left his family home in Cedar Rapids, eventually working as a deckhand to pay for passage to Europe. By the time he returned for his fiftieth class reunion, he had been a print journalist who had sat with Charles Lindbergh, Mahatma Gandhi, and Hermann Göring; a pioneering broadcaster who managed to scoop the Nazis in reporting the surrender of France; a blacklisted novelist who could not afford to fix his furnace; and the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, possibly the best-selling historical work written in modern times. Shirer's courageous reporting from Berlin, which included a remarkable partnership with Edward R. Murrow, guarantees his place among the greats of American journalism.

Canadian journalist Ken Cuthbertson is not the first to write a biography of Shirer, although Steve Wick's *The Long Night* (2011) is mostly set in the 1930s. Cuthbertson begins by exploring the deep Iowa roots of the Shirer family. In 1913, when Shirer was just 9 years old, his father, an assistant U.S. attorney, died from peritonitis, and his mother made the unhappy decision to move to her hometown of Cedar Rapids.

Shirer was an inconsistent student who could pass as an adult, and his adolescence was defined by work. At 15, he worked as a civilian clerk at Camp Funston in Kansas. Abetted by his mother, Shirer again lied about his age to tour the Midwest on the Chautauqua circuit, an experience that deepened his sense of wanderlust. Through Ethel Outland, his journalism mentor at Coe, Shirer won a job in the newsroom at the *Cedar Rapids Republican*, earning his first exclusive by barging into Jack Dempsey's private Pullman car and waking the sleeping boxer.

In contrast to Edmund White's nuanced portrait of Cedar Rapids in his recent biography of Carl van Vechten, Cuthbertson's depiction of Shirer's hometown can be exasperating. A few pages after recounting Shirer's memories of female coworkers at National Oats offering the bashful teenager the opportunity for "a drink and a roll" in Daniels Park, Cuthbertson somehow concludes that Iowans "as always" remained "hard working, down-to-earth, deeply spiritual, and conservative" (29). Cuthbertson does, however, do a very good job of portraying student life at Coe, while establishing the traits that would serve Shirer well as a reporter and badly as an employee.

The chapters on Iowa supplement Shirer's memoirs with correspondence, diaries, and newspapers deposited at Coe, but subsequent chapters frequently place too much weight on Shirer's memory. For instance, Cuthbertson treats the *Chicago Tribune* with the same contempt found in Shirer's memoirs, published four decades after he was clumsily sacked from the paper. Its owner, Robert R. McCormick, was "petulant, myopic, paranoid, and as authoritarian as any of the dictators who were on the march in Europe" (104). Cuthbertson does not make use of the critical biography of McCormick by Richard Norton Smith, who effectively challenges a number of Shirer's recollections of his seven-year tenure at the paper. Whereas the account of Shirer's tenure at the *Tribune* is offered as a cautionary tale of the corporate dissemination of the news, Cuthbertson glosses over the reactionary politics and questionable practices of the Hearst press, which rescued the unemployed Shirer.

Ultimately, the narrowness of Cuthbertson's source base undermines his worthwhile goal of demonstrating Shirer's accomplishments. Like most of his reporting, Shirer's historic broadcast of the German-French Armistice is recounted through his published recollections, leaving the reader to wonder what Shirer told Americans or how they reacted to the news. A biographer might be forgiven for not spending weeks at the National Archives sifting through State Department dispatches and captured German records to find new insights into the constraints American journalists faced in Nazi Germany, but it is difficult to justify the unwillingness to use digitized newspapers to show what impact Shirer had on national discussions of National Socialism and Communism. Cuthbertson argues that Shirer was blacklisted because of his liberalism, but he does not really pin down his politics, beyond pointing out his continued distrust of Germany and his opposition to the Truman Doctrine. Despite these shortcomings in contextualizing Shirer within "the American Century," *A Complex Fate* is an enjoyable read about a remarkable life.