On a number of occasions, most notably during his inaugural address as President, Bill Clinton has paid tribute to one of the people who taught him as a student, a man called Carroll Quigley. To at least 95% of those who heard the speech, the name meant nothing. But it sent a maj or frisson through a section of American conspiracy theorists. They knew who Carroll Quigley was; what they didn’t know was why the President of the United States was naming him in such a public way.

The American conspiracy theorist has always known that there were people out to destroy the paradise that was mythical America, land of the brave, home of the free. But they kept changing their minds about the identity of the evil conspirators. Was it the Catholics? The Masons? The Jews? The bankers? The East coast elite of ‘old money’? The Round Table? The Fabians? After 1917 they knew it was International Communism but they weren’t sure if there was someone else behind the Red Menace. Some suspected that Communism was merely a mask, a screensaver, that there was someone else behind the Red Menace. Was it the Catholics? The Masons? The Jews? The bankers? The East coast elite of ‘old money’? The Round Table? The Fabians? After 1917 they knew it was International Communism but they weren’t sure if there was someone else behind the Red Menace.

In the early 1950s formulation in which the threat was a ‘Fabian, Rhodes Scholar, Zionist, Pindo, Communist, New Deal, Deal, Socialist-minded gang’.

In the mid-1960s: the most important of the American conspiracy theory groups of the time, the John Birch Society, discovered the 1920s writing of a dead English writer called Nesta Webster. Webster had been quite widely read in Britain just after WW1 and she claimed to detect behind both French and Russian Revolutions the presence of an 18th century Masonic lodge called the Illuminati. On finding Webster, the Birchers looked as though they were about to move from being the most fervent exponents of the Great Communist Conspiracy Theory—Birch leader Robert Welch famously called President Eisenhower a ‘conscious conspirator’—to being the most fervent exponents of the Great Illuminati Conspiracy Theory. On finding Webster, the Birchers looked as though they were about to move from being the most fervent exponents of the Great Communist Conspiracy Theory—Birch leader Robert Welch famously called President Eisenhower a ‘conscious conspirator’—to being the most fervent exponents of the Great Illuminati Conspiracy Theory. But just as the organisation was about to make this shift, the Birchers discovered a book by the aforementioned Professor Carroll Quigley, Tragedy and Hope Which is where the story gets interesting.

Quigley’s Tragedy and Hope was published in New York by Macmillan in 1966. It was 1300 pages long. Its subtitle, a history of the world in our time, gives a sense of its ambition and scope: yet the 1300 pages carried no documentation, no sources of any kind. Educated at Harvard and Princeton, Quigley taught at the School of Foreign Service, Harvard, Yale, the Brookings Institute and the Foreign Service Institute of the State Department—all major league, American ruling class institutions.

Despite his impeccable academic credentials, the book being published by a major firm, and its unusual length and scope, Tragedy and Hope attracted only two tiny, dismissive, reviews from the American academic world, the first from a book which the first edition had been printed by. When the American writer Robert Conquest tracked Quigley down just before his death, Quigley warned him that writing about him and his book could get him into trouble.

What had Quigley done to deserve this extraordinary treatment? He had done two things. First, unusually for a mainstream American historian, Quigley had described in some detail the role of what he calls ‘finance capital’ in 20th century history. Second, more importantly, he included two sections, amounting to less than 20 of the book’s 1300 pages, which described the formation and some of the activities of an organisation known as the Round Table and its origins in the megalomaniac fantasies of the 19th century British imperialist Cecil Rhodes.

In the sections of Tragedy and Hope which caused Quigley problems, he claims that an organisation, variously titled the Rhodes Milner Group, the Round Table, and just the Milner group, had virtual control over British foreign policy for much of the first half of this century when Britain was one of the world’s leading powers. The inner core of this group, the Round Table, was a secret society founded by Cecil Rhodes. Using Rhodes’ money, this group set up the Round Table groups in the British Dominions, the Council on Foreign Relations in the U.S.; the network of Royal Institutes of International Affairs; the various Institutes of Pacific Relations; controlled the Rhodes Scholarships program; was largely responsible for the destruction of the League of Nations and the appeasement policies of the 1930s; and converted the British Empire into the Commonwealth. These ‘gracious and cultivated men of somewhat limited social experience’ as Quigley describes them, ‘constantly thought in terms of Anglo-American solidarity, of political partition and federation... were convinced that they could gracefully civilise the Boers of South Africa, the Irish, the Arabs and the Hindus... and were largely responsible for the partition of Ireland, Palestine and India, and for the federations of South Africa, Central Africa and the West Indies.’ And so on and so forth.

It is not that the Round Table people have been unknown. The names Quigley gives—e.g. in the inner group: Rhodes, Rothschild, William Stead, Viscount Esher, Milner, Abe Bailey, Earl Grey, H.A.L. Fisher, J an Smuts, Leopold Amery, the Asors—are well known. The Round Table group are conventionally viewed as a group of enthusiastic imperialists who had a period of some visibility and influence in the 1910-20 period. Their journal, The Round Table was well known between the wars, and is in many university libraries. (It continued until the mid 1970s, folded and was relaunched in the 1980s.)

Orthodox historians who have written about the Round Table people offer accounts of the period which are, more or less, consonant with Quigley’s thesis. Toynbee, for example, attributes the Royal Institute of International Affairs to the Round Table people; and Butler, himself part of the group in Quigley’s longer account, acknowledges that the so-called ‘Cleveden Set’ of the 1930s were, as Quigley claims, merely the Round Table at one of their regular meeting places.

In his biography of Rhodes, Flint gives a good deal of room to an account of the size and possible influence of the Rhodes Scholar network. He writes of ‘the excessive number of Rhodes Scholars in the Kennedy Administration’ and of the Rhodes Scholars forming ‘a recognisable elite in Canada.’ Apparently unaware of Quigley, Flint notes that ‘in each of the white settled Commonwealth countries, South Africa and the United States, a similar, if less influential elite, had emerged... and since 1948 India, Pakistan and Ceylon may be experiencing a similar development... Rhodes Scholars created links between American, British and Commonwealth “elites”... and they have played a role in creating the “special relationship” between the U.S., Britain and the dominions after 1945.’

Kendle, although he dismisses Quigley’s thesis without an explanation, is of particular interest: he, at least, had read Tragedy and Hope. No other historian of the period seems to have done so.

**Enter the ‘radical right’**

The one group of people who took Quigley to heart were the conspiracy theorists of the ‘radical right’ in America for whom Tragedy and Hope became a kind of bible. Here was the proof, the academically respectable proof, of the great conspiracy. It may not have been quite the conspiracy they had in mind, but it was a conspiracy none the less. Only a handful of academics have taken Quigley on board—Shoup and Minter, Carl Oglesby, Pieterse and van der Pijl—and none of them are mainstream Anglo-American historians. To that august body Quigley remains unknown—or unmentionable.

Quigley’s sketchy account of the Round Table in Tragedy and Hope comes to a halt after WW2. The Round Table was one manifestation of the power of the British Empire and, as that disintegrated after the war, to be replaced by the new American economic empire, so the Round Table network’s influence waned. The Rhodes Scholar network is still there; the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) is still the single dominant force.
in the formation of American foreign policy, and from the CFR grew the Trilateral Commission in the early 1970s. President Clinton has been a member of both—as well as a Rhodes Scholar. Even without the article of endorsement by the Trilateral Commission founder, David Rockefeller, going strong in this country but much of its standing as an ‘official foreign office’ has declined with the rise of other foreign policy think tanks. The last sighting of the Round Table as an organisation I have seen is a reference to it in the early 1970s.

Quigley’s thesis presents the familiar problems raised by the existence of all such elite groups: how to decide whether any particular policy outcome advocated by such groups was in fact the result of their advocacy. Even in his book solely about the Round Table network, Quigley mostly alleges rather than actually proving, the causal connections. (But the fact that he was so comprehensively blanked by academic history is, of course, a rather substantial hint that was on to something.)

In a sense what Quigley describes as the Round Table’s conspiracy is merely the traditional behaviour of the British ruling class—only systematised slightly. Instinctively secretive, until recently more or less protected from public scrutiny by its control of the mass media and from academic investigation by its control of the universities, in a sense the British ruling class is the most successful ‘conspiracy’ ever seen. But Quigley claimed more than that. He actually asserts the existence of an honest-to-goodness secret society operating at the heart of British foreign policy in the years between the war whose activities can be traced across the British Commonwealth and the United States. For an establishment professor of history this was a remarkable thing to have done in 1966 when discussion of the influence of elite management groups such as the CFR, RIIA and Bilderberg—especially the latter—was confined almost exclusively to the far right. These days such groups are discussed a little more openly; but the fact that the minutes of the 1999 Bilderberg meeting were leaked and posted on the Internet was not reported by any of the major British print media. It is thus perhaps not a surprise that Anglo-American historians remain almost completely ignorant of, or silent on, the existence of Quigley’s two books.

Notes

1. An early sighting of Clinton’s esteem for Quigley is in Atriaes, Journal of Netties and Diaries, ed. D. daniel Hapern (London: Collins Hapern, 1989). This is on p. 73 from the then largely unknown Governor Bill Clinton: ‘I had a course in western civilisation with a remarkable man, the late Carroll Quigley. I told the people at Georgetown thought he was a bit crazy and the other half thought he was a genius. They were both right.’

2. This is discussed in D. Daniel Birk, ‘Clinton, Quigley, and Conspiracy’, in Namebase Newsline, no. 14 April 1993—supplement to subscribers to Brandt’s Namebase database. This is available online at www.pit.org


6. Quigley wrote a book exclusively about the Round Table network which, though written in 1949, was not published until after his death. It is in this book, The Anglo-American Establishment (New York: Books in Focus, 1981), that the details of the group’s membership and alleged activities are given.


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