

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

01 – *Witness* – Chambers

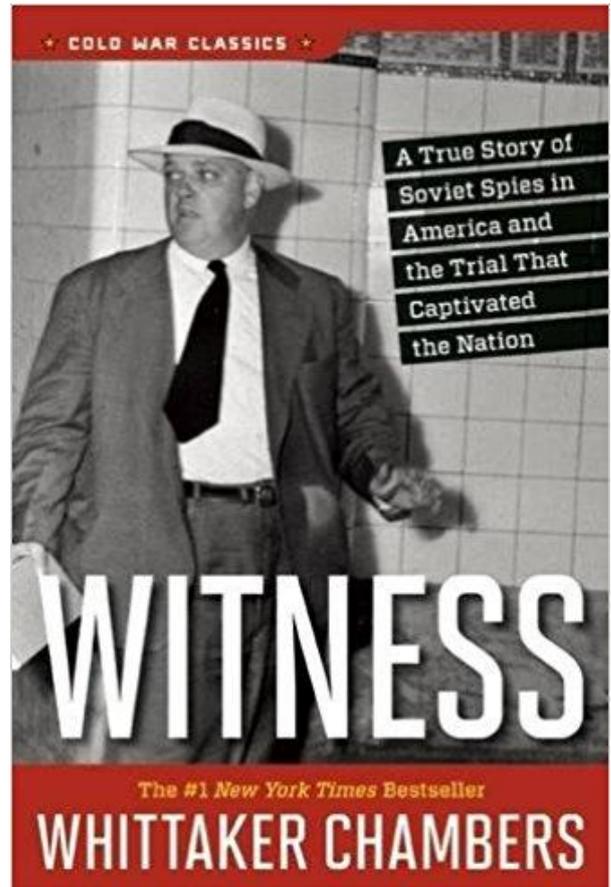
Title: WITNESS

Author: Whittaker Chambers

Publication info: First published to massive acclaim in the wake of the Alger Hiss trial, at which Chambers was a key witness, in 1952. This edition republished by Regnery History in 2001. (www.regneryhistory.com) (available on Amazon, click on cover image for link)

Keywords: Communism, USA, spies, Un-American Activities Committee, Alger Hiss, Richard Nixon, Quakerism

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 27 December 2017



Reason to read: This is a historic document, of sorts, being the autobiography of the man who sent Alger Hiss to jail; who provided the information that started the McCarthy hearings about communists in the US government; and who kick-started the anti-communist strand of Richard Nixon's career.

Main talking points:

1. It gives a clear insight into why one man, who came from a poor, and poorly-functioning family, but who was neither destitute nor uneducated, became a communist in the late 1920s. It shows how he grew to be profoundly disillusioned with communism, mainly because of its addiction to violence, secrecy and control.
2. It describes how the Depression brought intellectuals flocking to the Communist Party in the early 1930s and how these became natural allies of the New Deal, and moved effortlessly into government in the later 1930s. Alger Hiss was a classic case of this evolution.
3. Chambers makes a point which must have been very off-the-wall when he wrote, in 1952, but which now seems prescient. One of the main achievements of the "fellow travellers" of the 1930s and 40s was to destroy the natural alliance between China and the US and turn China into a Soviet ally. Curiously, it was Nixon who tried to undo that damage in the 1970s.

Incidental interest: This is Chambers's description of an important communist contact he made in the early days:

“Let me call him Noel. Noel was a big, fair, effete, rubbery man, who lolled in his chair or over his desk, collapsed in a kind of hereditary fatigue, or as if he had recently been boned. With me he was so grossly upper class that I suspected him of doing a caricature of this type, and doing it rather amusingly, for he had a catlike grace and craft. He was casually kind and covertly cruel. I think he liked to blend the two. I think that this was one of his chief pleasures in life, in which he felt justified because his kindness usually outweighed his cruelty. A hundred such patrician Noels must have toddled out of the baths in the warm dusk of dying Rome, with nothing more real on their minds than supper and the vomitorium.” (p. 26)

And this is what he wrote about Nixon:

“Throughout the most trying phases of the case, Nixon and his family, and sometimes his parents, were at our farm, encouraging me and comforting my family. My children have caught him lovingly in a nickname. To them, he is always ‘Nixie’, the kind and the good, about whom they will tolerate no nonsense. His somewhat martial Quakerism sometimes amused and always heartened me. I have a vivid picture of him, in the bleakest hour of the Hiss Case, standing by the barn and saying in his quietly savage way (he is the kindest of men): ‘If the American people understood the real character of Alger Hiss, they would boil him in oil.’” (p. 701)

Style: Vivid and fluent (Chambers was a senior writer for *TIME* magazine between the time he left the Communist Party and got caught up in the Hiss case.)

Surprising points: You've heard of the Paradise Papers, the Panama Papers and the Pentagon Papers. But who remembers the Pumpkin Papers? This was the stash of documents which Chambers used to preserve his proof against Hiss and Harry Dexter White (communist head of the World Bank and enemy of Britain at Bretton Woods) from the searches of his farm by the FBI. He hid them in a hollowed-out pumpkin in one of his pumpkin beds.

Link(s): You can hear three speakers talking about the book on 50th anniversary of its publication here: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?177826-1/whittaker-chambers-conference> It includes a very subtle discussion on the various meanings of liberalism in the later twentieth century, and how they can tip into non-liberalism when they need to defend social openness.

Negative issues: The book is far too long (over 700 pages), and has too much personal angst, especially about the Quakerism Chambers adopted after he abandoned communism. There is the high level of self-absorption that is so often found in people who, paradoxically, are attached to an impersonal but apparently philanthropic “cause”.

Overall recommendation level: Fairly high – if you have the time!