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The Fringes of Power: Ten Downing Street Diaries, 1939-1955

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John Colville

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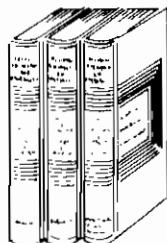
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PROFESSIONAL READING



A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

Michael A. Freney

Colville, John. *The Fringes of Power: Ten Downing Street Diaries, 1939-1955*. New York: Norton, 1986. 796pp. \$25 paper \$12.95

Here is a book to fascinate historians, biographers, filmmakers, gossip mongers, or just plain readers. Sir John Colville, long-time private secretary to Winston Churchill, served three prime ministers during critical periods before, during and after World War II. He has given us a diary that is at once invaluable because of the author's proximity to events and personalities, and simultaneously so delightful to read that, after the first few pages, the book's bulk becomes an invitation rather than a challenge.

The panorama of events and the cast of characters are extraordinary. Chamberlain, Churchill, Atlee, the British Royal Family, Churchill's family, most of the prominent U.S. leaders during World War II, most of the military leaders of the period from Britain, France, and the United States, and scores of other players, including some fascinating contemporaries of Colville himself, fill the pages with action and humanity, heroism and connivance, kindness and spite.

Churchill dominates. From his grand vision to his personal idiosyncrasies, he is portrayed in glaring light, moderated only by the clear loyalty that Sir John held for the man.

Dr. Freney is Secretary of the Navy Fellow at the Naval War College. He was previously Senior Fellow and Deputy Chief Operating Officer, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.

The tapestry is extraordinarily rich with insights into life among the leaders of Britain during the great threat to that nation. Not all of it is pretty. Many Americans who served in the blood and gore of the foxholes, in the all-too vulnerable ships, and in the freezing and frightening aircraft of the time will wonder at the privilege enjoyed by the British leaders. Indeed, an American is left to wonder whether one of the reactions to the Colville diary in Britain may not have been immense resentment by those who served in less exalted positions within the British war effort. But the British society was class-based society then, even more than it is now. The book shows that.

Military historians will be particularly fascinated by the discussion of decisions to appoint various key leaders and to remove others. The devastating effect of unpreparedness in Britain at the beginning of the war, the machinations to involve the United States, and the long wait until the United States mobilized are all graphically displayed.

Colville's contemporaneous writings about the relationship between Churchill and de Gaulle portended events that continue to plague the North Atlantic Alliance. Churchill's attitudes toward Stalin over time, again recorded contemporaneously, were chillingly prophetic.

One could go on about structure, process, function, and personality. In the process, the reviewer would fail to capture the color and wit Colville adds to these important topics. Beyond that, an exceptional set of biographical notes, a list of abbreviations and an excellent index beckon the serious scholar.

It is better, though, to let Colville speak for himself. This volume of diaries is one of the best sources in recent times on the subject of power in crisis.

Manchester, William. *The Last Lion; Winston Spencer Churchill: Alone, 1932-1940*. Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1988. 800pp. \$24.95

This is a book for every military officer who faces the prospect of challenging accepted wisdom. Reading this well-written volume, which William Manchester narrates with the story-telling ability of a novelist, is a pleasurable experience. His affection for Churchill is obvious, and there is sufficient documentation to support his enthusiasm. All of us are familiar with the major events.

Most of us know the characters, both good and bad, as well as some of the issues, but this volume presents them in great depth. The author portrays Churchill as a man isolated by circumstance, but with the emotional stability, self-confidence, and political will to see the future, to warn of its consequences, and to repeat those warnings over and over again to his hostile audience of fellow subjects.

The book's lesson illustrates how evidence of what was to come was readily ascertainable to anyone who