A SCOTTISH LIFE: SIR JOHN MARTIN, CHURCHILL AND EMPIRE

Michael Jackson. Edited by Janet Jackson.

Sir John Martin (1904-1991), a Scottish born son of a minister father and social worker mother, made a career in the British Colonial Office and, during World War II, as Winston Churchill’s Principal Private Secretary. He was well educated at Edinburgh Academy in the classical tradition, went to Officers’ Training Corps there, and then on to Corpus Christi College at Oxford. He took the then typical, for well to do young gentlemen, tour of Europe. In the Colonial Office, John made the rounds of India and other British South Asian colonies, and then returned home. He was involved closely with the debates over what to do with Palestine in the pre-war era. His service to Churchill during the war was exemplary, and then he joyfully returned to service in the Colonial Office, where he was one of many who oversaw the dismantling of the British Empire. As he saw it, his responsibility in this task, as with all else he undertook, was to see that it was done with “integrity” and honor (148). For a good Christian man, as John saw himself, this was of the utmost importance.

The material for this book was obtained largely from John Martin’s own writings. He kept a detailed diary through the years, and he was a devoted letter writer - to his parents, particularly his mother, and then to his wife. These are invaluable sources in a biography. And, in this particular case, they provide a great deal of detailed information about the inner workings, not only of the man who wrote them, but also are irreplaceable as a source about the workings of the Colonial Office and of Churchill’s finest hours as Prime Minister. In fact, excerpts from Martin’s writings account for over 50% of the book’s content.
This leads to the first of the possible criticisms of this book. While Martin’s writings are interesting, they tend towards repetitiveness after some time and consume pages which might be better used in analysis, both of Martin’s writings and perceptions, as well as critiques of his place in the colonial venture, his own sense of Anglo superiority over colonial peoples, and some exposition of how his views of Empire and duty did not quite mesh with those of the people over whom he presumed to rule, benevolently or not.

Even a cursory reading and inclusion of some of the analyses of a few essays on the concept of nation and colonialism would have provided some balance in the book, and prevented its author and editor from presenting us with a saint, rather than a man.¹ The Jacksons, though, only felt it necessary to provide outside evidence that spoke to Martin’s exemplary character and amiable nature. This has the effect of removing Martin from his own historical context, and it completely ignores the most prominent body of literature today available to the historian about this complex period of history, the 20th century and the era of decolonization.

This criticism is part and parcel of the second major criticism of this work. It has the failing of so many other biographies, an overwhelming bias, either for or against its subject. In this case, the pro-Martin bias seems to stem from the fact that the book’s editor is also the niece of its subject. And, the author is the husband of that niece. One need not doubt their sincerity about Martin’s sense of honor. From the man’s own writings, one gleans this fact. He had every impulse to do what he understood to be the right and proper thing, to live up to his duty.

What he lacked, and what his biographers lack, is the capacity to see himself and be seen as a human being who bought into the prejudices of his own time, who had a decidedly British worldview, no matter how impartial he tried to be, or thought he was being, in his many dealings with those outside of Britain. Martin exhibits a considerable lack of sensitivity to the cultures and customs of non-European peoples. He writes of a servant he had while in Malaysia. “I find him useful as a dictionary...” But, there is a tone of superiority when he relates how much extra he
is paying the “lad” so that he might pay for “absurdly gorgeous wedding garments.” The servant’s one value, aside from providing a walking dictionary, was that he “never forg[ot] his place” (49). Further lack of Martin’s understanding of the peoples he visited comes with this brief description, “judging by the number of their temples, most of the Chinese must be Taoists or whatever Chinese are” (55). Martin has little interest in them except their colonial relationship with Britain.

Any analysis of such comments by Martin is completely lacking and is passed over with little or any commentary of worth. The only thing Jackson manages to say about Martin’s attitude toward other cultures is this:

John’s awareness of acquiring a white man’s superiority complex was a good mark for his own self-examination. After moving among the top stratum of Malayan administration and society for a year and a half, he was determined not to let his head be turned, but could see why he had developed this complex (65).

That Martin did not let his “head be turned” is debatable. And, while Martin’s was certainly a common enough attitude at the time, the lack of analysis on it is uncalled for in this era of historical development on topics such as colonialism, cultural hegemony, and the like.

Finally, one must take issue with the title of this book and the author’s assertion that this is somehow a particular examination of a “Scottish” life. There is very little that recommends it as a study on the unique qualities of being born and raised Scottish. The only things Martin himself says about it, if we are to take the provided excerpts as typical of his writings, is that he usually writes to his mother when he meets another Scot. There is nothing that would otherwise suggest a Scottish experience. John Martin is first and foremost a British subject and citizen. Those are his concerns. Not once does he comment that he is raising the value of Scotland within the Empire. If the Jacksons are trying to assert that Martin is a case in point of a lack of a particularly Scottish identity, they have accomplished their task.
very well. The one redeeming value to the book must be reiterated here. If one wanted to read primary documents and get a sense of the inner workings of the Colonial Office, the personal feelings of those involved in the decision making process, then this is an excellent source. However, if one thought to read this book as some sort of analysis of the process of decolonization, or any of the other endeavors of which Martin participated, then one ought to look elsewhere.

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Endnotes

1. For instance, Partha Chatterjee’s Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World (1986), E. J. Hobsbawm’s Nations and Nationalism since 1780 (1990), the writings of Antonio Gramsci, and dozens of other related and more specific works on the subject.