



Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, and the Schism in the American Soul

By Patrick Swan

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In 1952, Random House published Whittaker Chambers's *Witness*. Not only did it immediately become a bestseller; it was recognized by many as one of the great spiritual autobiographies of the twentieth century. In *Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, and the Schism in the American Soul*, editor Patrick Swan marks the fiftieth anniversary of *Witness*'s publication by anthologizing 23 of the best essays ever written on Chambers, Hiss, or both. Essays by literary luminaries such as Leslie Fiedler, Arthur Koestler, Lionel Trilling, Rebecca West, Murray Kempton, and William F. Buckley Jr. tell the story of these two fascinating (and ultimately mysterious) men and of what they and their conflict represented. Sampling the entire spectrum of respectable thought on Hiss and Chambers, these pieces do not, as a rule, trouble themselves much with the facts of the case; Hiss's guilt was not so much in doubt then, and is certainly well documented by now. But the essayists' divergent opinions on the nature of communism (and anticommunism), liberalism, the proper relationship between religion and politics, and many other issues remain provocative -- perhaps even more so now than when they were written.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

In August 1948, Alger Hiss, a former State Department bureaucrat, was accused of being a Soviet spy (he was tried and ultimately found guilty). The case quickly became a cause célèbre, the center of the bitter battle between conservatives (long out of power but smelling blood) and liberals over the history of the previous 20 years and the direction in which the country should proceed. This is a collection of 23 essays from such heavyweights as Diana and Lionel Trilling, William F. Buckley Jr., Rebecca West, Hugh Kenner, Sam Tanenhaus, Murray Kempton, and others. They not only comment on various aspects of the case but also shed light on the broader controversies that engulfed the country, such as the defensiveness of liberals with regard to their past support of the USSR, the abusive investigative tactics of McCarthy, Nixon, and the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the pervasive climate of fear. The publication dates range from 1950 to 2001, so the later writings were done after the opening of Soviet archives, showing that Hiss was almost certainly a spy. Contributors' notes identify the writers and offer brief background characterizing their position on the case. Although it helps to be well versed in the intellectual history of the period, this book is recommended for academic and larger public libraries.

Daniel K. Blewett, Coll. of DuPage Lib., Glen Ellyn, IL

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About the Author

Patrick Swan served as research assistant to Terry Teachout for the Teachout's edited collection of essays by Chambers titled *Ghosts on the Roof*. Swan is the former recipient of the Army's Journalist of the Year award. He is currently Public Affairs Liaison in the Chief Information Office of the Army.

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