

PLATE XIX



Photograph by Walter Stoneman

DENIS WILLIAM BROGAN

SIR DENIS WILLIAM BROGAN

1900-1974

DENIS BROGAN was born on 11 August 1900 in Rutherglen, Glasgow, the eldest son of Denis and Elizabeth Toner Brogan. His father, a native Gaelic-speaker from County Donegal, had emigrated briefly to the United States before settling, as a merchant tailor, in Glasgow, and the child grew up in a home where awareness of America went hand in hand with a keen interest in the Irish literary revival. Politically the family was Liberal, pro-Boer, and Irish Nationalist in its sympathies.

Brogan received his early education at the local Catholic parochial school and then at Rutherglen Academy, where the strong influence of a devoted history master did much to shape his intellectual development. But poor health between the ages of twelve and eighteen did almost more, by releasing the boy from routine schooling and setting him free to indulge what was already a voracious appetite for reading. At his father's urging he entered Glasgow University with the intention of qualifying in medicine, but despite initial success in the pre-clinical preparation for the subject, realization that practical skills would never be his *forte* led him to revert to his initial enthusiasm for history. He took his M.A. at Glasgow in 1923.

From Glasgow by a natural progression in such circumstances his path led, by way of a Snell Exhibition, to Balliol, which he entered in Michaelmas Term 1923. There he read History, with Humphrey Sumner as his tutor, and took an easy First in the Schools in 1925. His contemporaries remember him as having already at his disposal, in an Oxford that made virtually no provision for formal study of the United States, an encyclopedic knowledge of Americana, both academic and sub-academic. Guided by Samuel Eliot Morison, then in residence at Balliol as Oxford's first Harmsworth Professor of American History, Brogan proceeded in 1925, by way of a Rockefeller Research Fellowship, to Harvard. There he found as much stimulus in the Massachusetts and America of Calvin Coolidge as in the Harvard of Lawrence Lowell and he responded to both with equal zest.

On his return from America in 1927 he worked briefly on *The Times* until in 1928 he received an appointment as Lecturer

in History at University College London. There he met Olwen Kendall then teaching ancient history in the College, whom he married in 1931 and whose interests in the archaeology of Gaul sparked his own curiosity about France, past and present. (They spent every summer there together until 1937.)

In 1930 Brogan was appointed to an Assistant Lecturership in Politics at the London School of Economics. It was during his tenure of this post that he produced his first and deservedly his best-known book, *The American Political System*, published in 1933.

To appreciate the significance of *The American Political System* it is necessary to think back to the low level of awareness of things American which obtained in the Britain of the twenties and early thirties. In academic circles American humane scholarship was seldom accorded the tribute of more than a patronizing and distant recognition. To study at an American university was still regarded, for most scholars in the arts, as a rather bizarre eccentricity, requiring especial justification, if not positive academic atonement. Hardly any universities gave much space in their curricula to the study of the United States, save as an early and errant offshoot of the United Kingdom. Even those American institutions which had attracted the talents of a Bryce and the notice of a Dicey, had come to be judged, no doubt in the wake of American political isolationism, as being of little concern to the serious student of politics, save in their most formal and constitutional aspects.

Upon this prim and parochial vision Brogan's *American Political System* fell like a coruscating rocket. Between the old Whiggish image of an America vaguely linked to the abstractions of 1789 and the current establishment's dismissal of it as an intrinsically uninteresting business society, Brogan interposed the portrait of a diverse, evolving democracy with a rich and colourful political culture, a worthy object of study not merely to the political moralist but almost equally to the social anthropologist. The book virtually re-discovered America for a generation of British readers as a country to which the reach-me-down axioms of Anglo-Saxon political theory did *not* apply, where the historic pieties were overlaid with a very antithetical set of actualities, whose successes and failures demanded assessment in the light of their distinctive circumstances, not by Old World criteria, respectful or dismissive.

For such a re-discovery of the American system Brogan was ideally qualified, first by his early exposure to the politics of

Glasgow, a city which he often described as the most American in Britain, but also by his instinctive rapport with the Irish tradition that had shaped so much of the actualities of political America. But if this gave him an immediate entrée, practical as well as imaginative, to the arcana of American politics, he was saved from too easy an acceptance of the Hibernian myth by a scepticism provided by both temperament and education. In so far as Brogan's America was Irish, it was the Irishry of Mr. Dooley rather than that of St. Patrick's Day parades.

It followed from the distinctive character of Brogan's new-found-land that the emphases of his book fell on the politics of the American system of government rather than on its administration. 'The emphasis', as he said in his introduction, was 'laid, deliberately, on those aspects of the American system which, in their origin or development, are most American.' Consequently there is little on the constitutional framework—and what there is emphasizes not its theory but its practical consequences—only a chapter on the courts, and that devoted exclusively to judicial review, only one shortish section on the presidency, and nothing on the bureaucracy save as an adjunct to the spoils system. The emphasis throughout is on the political process—the legislature, the parties, the machines, the conventions, the campaigns. It is here, in the dust and the shirt-sleeves, not in the office and the frock-coat, that the realities of power are found to reside. And the stress falls on observation and description, not on prescription and judgement. The author's aim is 'to depict it as it is, with as little reference as possible to what it might be'. The Brycean categories of 'good government' are suppressed, if not discarded, and the critics' complaints are implicitly met by reminders of the social needs that machine politics serves and the overlap between the bribe-taking of politicians and the bribe-offering of businessmen. All this, however, is delineated not in the drab prose of social analysis but with the vividness of personal observation and the quips, allusions, and gaiety of an observer who finds the human scene a moving picture of colour and diversity—and one moreover in which the last scene links always with all that has gone before. For Brogan, the student of politics, is never out of sight of his twin, the student of history, and *The American Political System*, for all its contemporaneity, has a balance and sense of proportion that come of being deeply rooted in history.

Appearing in 1933, *The American Political System* was both fortunate and unfortunate in its timing. It was perfectly timed

to quicken and direct the interest in America wakened by the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt but it was its peculiar misfortune that the politics which it so graphically and acutely depicted was itself transformed into near-unrecognizability by the reforms of that same New Deal. Thus Brogan fell victim to that ill luck that Tocqueville alone of America's interpreters has been privileged to escape, of being overtaken by the changes in the society he is seeking to describe. Yet in the eternal race between chameleon America and her interpreters there has been no one more willing, indeed eager, to accept the challenge to keep pace than Denis Brogan. In one aspect at least of his own many-faceted intelligence this may indeed be said to be the story of his remaining years.

For an overt demonstration of Brogan's pace-keeping no better example could be found than his *Introduction to American Politics* which appeared in 1954.¹ In one sense this was merely an up-dating of *The American Political System* in that it utilized the same approach and substantially the same categories of treatment as the earlier work; there is the same emphasis on the political process, the same lack of interest in the administrative side of government. But not only is the book re-cast; it is virtually re-written. Even the same material is re-worked and its presentation re-phrased, with a fecundity of illustration and quotation whose spontaneity is as remarkable as its scope. Thus the reader who opts for only one of the two treatments, even in respect of their historical sequences, is going to miss a whole mass of freshly mined information and a range of novel analogies and examples so prolific that they cannot be contained in the text but spill over into footnotes often a paragraph in length.² If *The American Political System* reflected the America of the Depression, the *Introduction to American Politics* reflected the America of the Fair Deal and the Cold War.

¹ Mention ought also to be made of *Politics and Law in the United States*, a sorbet between two entrées, which, appearing in 1941, was for most of its 30,000 words a precised account of the American political system appropriate to a volume in a wartime 'Current Problems' series. But it too had its distinctive feature—a fresh and predominantly critical analysis of the working of judicial review as a central feature of American government.

² The Brogan footnote constitutes an art form in itself. In *The American Political System* the device, though already an established vehicle for entertaining anecdote or amplifying explanation, is still fairly sparingly employed. By the time *The Price of Revolution* is reached there are more footnotes than pages and their range is at once encyclopedic in content and infinitely variable in style.

Alongside these major expositions there flowed from Brogan's pen throughout his life a stream of papers, articles, essays, despatches even, which ranged over every aspect of America past and present. Only a pedant would seek to categorize these according to their status as 'journalism' or 'scholarship'. Brogan himself would have embraced a charge of 'journalist' as a compliment. One part of him was in the authentic lineage of Grub Street, the gifted Scots reviewer, the provincial with a pen making his own way in the metropolitan literary free-for-all, able to turn any theme into printable prose but incapable of subordinating his independence of mind to the requirements of any editorial or proprietorial line. He took pride in this and declined no reputable opportunity to demonstrate his remarkable talent to meet a deadline or produce a piece, to use one of his own favourite phrases, *pour servir*. But if his adaptability and output in this respect were remarkable, so that he constituted himself a kind of one-man roving press corps on America, writing now from Omaha, now from Cambridge (Mass.), now from Cambridge (Eng.), what was no less remarkable was his refusal to compartmentalize his output, to write down, to ration his complexity (or his allusions) to match the assumed capacities of his readers. The mere fact that a contemporary event was being reported in an ephemeral journal was never, in Brogan's mind, a reason for not viewing it *sub specie historiae*. And every Brogan *ephemeron*, no matter how 'popular', rested upon a bedrock of solid fact freshly assembled for the occasion; it was said of him with justice that one never rose from reading a Brogan review or essay, however fugitive, without having added some new nugget of knowledge to one's store.

But if there is no clear line to be drawn between Brogan's journalism and his scholarship, it is also true that many of his most enduring and compelling insights came from the stimulus which a direct encounter with contemporary scenes and actors provided him. In this sense his tirelessly recurrent tours of the U.S.A. provided him not merely with first-hand information but no less importantly with the catalyzing impulse for his constant re-analysis and re-assessment of the country's complex personality. The fruits of these transatlantic peregrinations lie scattered over a score of periodicals, British and American, but may be sampled in two volumes of collected papers, in which characteristically Brogan made no sharp distinction between ostensibly scholarly and ostensibly journalistic exercises. *American Themes* (1948) contains more, and slighter items; *American*

Aspects (1964) fewer and longer, but both well illustrate the astonishing range and rapidity of his observations and inductions. None of their contents would waste a reader's time, even at this remove. Many have an enduring relevance; *The Illusion of American Omnipotence* remains a classic delineation of a crucial and disastrous mood of the American public mind, and the *Critique of New World Culture* constitutes a permanent warning, all the more impressive for coming from the lips of such an *afficionado*, against the confusion of cultural standards and sociological significance that mars much of what passes for scholarship in the field of American studies.

Curiously, for an Americanist with such a historical cast of mind, only a small part of Brogan's huge output consists of works directly devoted to American history. Thus *The American Problem* (1944) is ostensibly addressed to the emerging 'problem' of America's place in the postwar world; in fact, however, it is a wide-ranging series of historical essays exploring major themes of the American past. It represents indeed in its rejection alike of chronological narrative and of a formal structure of argument a type of treatment that ideally suited Brogan's talents; it proceeds by an association of ideas congruent with the subject-matter, too rich for tidy schemata but coordinating the seemingly disparate, combining the superficially diverse, so as to give the reader a new awareness of the essential character of American development.

The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1950), published in Britain in 1952 under the title *Roosevelt and the New Deal*, was a straightforward historical treatment of an epoch in American development which Brogan by virtue of first-hand experience during the years of the New Deal and World War II was especially well fitted to handle. Yet its virtues, of balance, compactness, and clarity were not particularly Broganesque, while it lacked its full quota of tart judgements, wide-ranging excursions, and sharply relevant minutiae of men and affairs. Its author was doubtless inhibited by an imposed format (it was a volume in the *Chronicles of America* series) which not only denied him his beloved footnotes but also obliged him to devote an even-handed treatment to the topics that bored as well as to those that fascinated him. The book remains nevertheless a survey of the period which will always have something to say to anyone interested in its politics or who values an intimate contemporary assessment free of distinctively American prejudices or attachments.

In 1934 Brogan had moved from the L.S.E. back to Oxford, where he was invited to become a Fellow and Tutor at Corpus in succession to the gifted, prematurely stricken Charles Henderson. The college, who wanted a 'wide-ranging historian' to teach in both the Modern History and the new P.P.E. Schools, could not have made a better choice. Brogan's translation coincided with a quickening of his interest in a territory wholly other than America. From boyhood, when he first fell under the spell of Alexandre Dumas, France had been a keen, if subordinate, attraction. Now in the thirties, with his wife Olwen's archaeological researches providing the occasion for regular periods of joint residence in provincial France, it became an intellectual passion hardly less consuming than that of the United States itself. Not without justice did Brogan boast of his honorary citizenship of the Commune of La Roche Blanche; he entered as swiftly and intimately into the life and historical inheritance of the Puy de Dôme as, a decade earlier, he had entered into those of Boston, Mass. In the complexity, intricacy, stubborn individuality and particularity of France past and present he found replicated much of what in the United States had simultaneously excited his powers of observation and stimulated his suspicions of a priorism in the study of historical societies. He adored the depth, layer upon historical layer, of the French political tradition, the density of its Proustian social and cultural fabric, the diversity of its human comedy, the interpenetration of its public and intellectual worlds.

Of this the outstanding product is *The Development of Modern France, 1870-1939* (1940, revised edition, *1870-1959*, 1966), easily his largest opus—it is over twice the length of *The American Political System* and is even more densely packed with detail. Too densely, without doubt, for its immediate full acceptance; it is even more allusive than its American forerunner and makes even fewer concessions to the reader who cannot parallel the encyclopedic range of the writer. (The author's claim that it was 'intended for the general public' can be accepted only if 'public' is understood in a peculiarly restricted sense.) Yet the service it rendered to British understanding of modern France can reasonably be compared, *mutatis mutandis*, to that rendered by the earlier book in respect of the U.S.A. For the first time, in English or French, the disordered and complex phenomena of the Third Republic were reduced to a coherent narrative history which omits nothing of consequence and preserves a scrupulous balance between its component parts. Despite its

factual density the narrative flow is remarkably sustained; the reader is swept on by the author's zest, however often he may stub his intellectual toes on unelucidated allusions or historical parallels beyond his immediate ken. It is not true, as some early critics implied, that the social and economic background is neglected; on the contrary, the roles of agriculture, industry, finance, technology, and education are delineated with a grasp of both principle and detail which would excite surprise in most other historians. Yet it is true that the bias of the book is political, not so much in concentrating on political phenomena as in sharing the assumptions about causation and motivation that come naturally to the student or practitioner of politics. The book is suffused by an equal distrust of economic factors as prime movers in historical change and of abstract theorists as guides to human behaviour. It accepts as an axiom the concept of a national character and respects the role of national institutions in shaping political decisions, but it respects even more profoundly the role of the individual, the play of the contingent, the power both of faith and illusion in human affairs, and the limitless range of human folly and error. It always stops this side of cynicism, but its mood never strays far from the ironic. Its tone throughout is that of realism tinged with affection. The same characteristics, displayed on a smaller scale over a more extended period, marked a successor volume, *The French Nation, 1814-1940* (1957). That book's concluding reflection, that the French had failed in their post-revolutionary eras 'to find institutions that united the French people and gave them a political way of life worthy of their genius, their courage, their legitimate hopes', did equal justice to Brogan's conviction of the cruciality of political institutions and his distrust of revolutionary *a priori*ism.

These strands are to be found recurring in *French Personalities and Problems* (1946), a collection of essays written mainly in the war years and resonant with the emotions and drama of that time. Most of them can be better understood if they are read as the by-products and workshop chippings, so to speak, of Brogan's war-work. His talents, for all their range, were not such as the war machine could easily absorb; after an initial period in the Foreign Office's Foreign Research and Press Service Brogan was seconded briefly to the American Division of the Ministry of Information. From there he was invited to join the Political Warfare Executive at Woburn Abbey but his relations with its political head, Hugh Dalton, were predictably

stormy and he very quickly moved back to the overseas broadcasting services of the B.B.C. There he found more congenial wartime colleagues, in particular his old Parisian journalist friend and free-lance archeologist, Darsie Gillie, and ample outlets for even his prodigal talents. Not content with his main duties as an intelligence officer in the B.B.C.'s European Service, preparing material aimed at occupied Europe,¹ he also undertook to provide the North American Service with a mass of background guidance and suggestions designed to relate the course of the war in Europe to the expectations and assumptions of the B.B.C.'s American listeners. When the wartime archives of these services come to be opened they will be found to contain a veritable encyclopedia of curious Broganesque learning strikingly applied to the exigencies of the time and the medium.

As if this were not occupation enough for these strenuous years Brogan also found time in 1943 to publish *The English People: Impressions and Observations*, which if not an original work of scholarship nevertheless reveals a blend of acute observation and historical and institutional insight analogous to that displayed in *The American Problem*. It can be read as a fascinating period piece, interlarded and footnoted with the concerns, great and trivial, of the war and interwar years, or as an exercise in, so to speak, third-programme propaganda aimed at an American ally often ignorant, sometimes suspicious of English behaviour. But the book is more than this; read a generation later, it stands as a learned and pungent re-assessment by 'a foreigner of a kind', to use his own expression, of the recognized views of English belief and behaviour in all the main aspects of the nation's life.

A relish for national divergencies and cultural idiosyncracies, a tolerance even for a wide range of responses to the challenges of the times, was a marked feature of these writings, but a sharper note was struck in another series of volumes spanning much the same fertile period. In *Is Innocence Enough?* (1941), an admonitory tract, Brogan addressed himself to the soft underbelly of appeasement, particularly of the left-wing variety. In 1951 appeared the more serious and extended *Price of Revolution*. This too was a tract for the times, but one which proceeded by way of a far-ranging inquiry into the acceptance of the revolutionary idea into western political culture, indeed of 'revolution'

¹ His services to France in this capacity were recognized in 1946 by the award of the Legion of Honour, and those to the Netherlands by the award of a cross of the Order of Orange Nassau.

as a 'political institution'. It is an attempt at that most difficult of exercises, historical cost-benefit analysis, designed to assess the true price of revolution in terms of eggs smashed as well as omelettes made, and it is idle to pretend that Brogan's book-keeping transcends the private values and personal judgements of the author. But it would have to be a fairly dedicated revolutionary who was not made to think again across the whole ragged front of international fanaticism by the stubborn reminders that Brogan accumulates of the real obstacles, in history, national psychology, political economy, and ordinary human intractability to the realization of utopia by rationalized violence and ideological short cuts.

In the spring of 1939 Brogan was elected to the Professorship of Political Science at Cambridge and to a Fellowship at Peterhouse—though the onset of war prevented him taking up his duties until 1945. There were those who doubted whether his talents would find their natural outlet in a chair whose formal duties gave such little scope for his historical and particularistic interests. But apart from the absence at that time in Britain of any chair tenable by a British subject in American history it would have been hard to devise any senior academic appointment which would have matched Brogan's protean versatility. Wisely, the statutes governing the chair contained a provision granting incumbents leave of absence one term in three. This made possible those regular transatlantic visits by which Brogan kept himself abreast of the continuously changing American scene. In his inaugural, *The Study of Politics* (1946), Brogan was quite frank: 'I am by equipment, by temperament and by limitations a student of political institutions. I am incapable of changing, of becoming a political philosopher or a philosophical historian.' He warned against the imposition on the teaching of politics of 'a degree of abstractness or bogus neutrality that it cannot stand' and he insisted that 'present politics is always at least half history'. His heart never lay in abstractions and those who looked to him for a development of the subject along formal, metaphysical, or even linguistic-analytic lines were bound to be disappointed. Yet the history of political thought received at his hands a brilliant exposition enriched with a wealth of illustration and laced with a bracing irony. It is to be regretted that none of his lecture courses was published, but it has to be admitted that his formal academic duties did not lie at the heart of his interests during his Cambridge period. As a glance at the publications of his professorial years will reveal,

his interests remained basically anchored where they always had been in the history of France and the U.S.A.¹ It was here, in the study of the people, politics, and institutions of these two very different exemplifications of liberal democracy, that his greatest contribution was made and it is to his writings on these themes that scholars will return as long as they share his concern for the values and creativity of these societies.

No account of Brogan's work which omitted some reference to his activities as a reviewer would do him justice. He was as remarkable for the speed and precision of his reading as for the range of his literary appetite. At his hands a book could be gutted, its merits assessed, its pertinence established, and the errors pin-pointed in the time it took to do the train journey from Cambridge to Liverpool Street. The majority of these swift but balanced assessments found their way into the columns of the *Times Literary Supplement*,² where his notices, whether brief or extended, were stylistically so immediately recognizable that the mere addition of a signature would have done nothing to facilitate identification. Publications on the most recondite topics were related, by some play of fancy or recherché connection, to the more familiar or topical. Carelessness or pretentiousness were never allowed to go unexposed, and yet his notices, whether signed or anonymous, were always equally free of scholarly malice or self-serving.

Zest and conscientiousness were the twin hall-marks of these productions just as they were of Brogan's whole output, spoken or written. The conscientiousness was at once that of a scholar and of a citizen; the zest was that of a true humanist who recognized nothing alien under the visiting moon. So it was the same Brogan who examined searchingly, fiercely, but never unkindly the pedantic D.Phil. candidate and who applied his wits on B.B.C. 'quiz' programmes for the delectation of marveling millions. Ultimately, he admitted no distinction between work and play; the whole boundless panorama of human activity was equally his quarry and his playground. It was characteristic of him that at the height of the war when laid up by what anyone else would have treated as a debilitating ailment he turned his

¹ Indeed his only published work on classical political theory was his youthful study of *Proudhon* (1934), a 25,000-word essay in a 'Makers of the Modern World' series.

² Just as before the war, over the initials 'D.W.B.', they had made the review columns of the *Oxford Magazine* almost a bibliography raisonnée of scholarly productions on the United States.

idle pen to the composition of an Anglo-American entertainment, a thriller entitled *Stop on the Green Light* (1941) and published under the pseudonym of Maurice Barrington. The plot is bad enough to serve as a Verdi libretto, but the fast-paced misadventures of his Oxford hero turned temporary civil servant in Washington provide an excuse for a romp around American mores and wartime politics. The *Free Frontiersmen of America* admirably parody the rhetoric of the *America First* movement and Senator Robert Quinn McCarter uncannily foreshadows his para-homonym from Wisconsin of ten years later.

In 1973 not long before his death Brogan agreed to revise, for a second time, the brief study of *Abraham Lincoln* which originally appeared in Duckworth's *Great Lives* series in 1935 and immediately established itself as a classic miniature. Brogan did not live to complete his revision and the book appeared posthumously in 1974 with a preface by his son, Hugh Brogan. That Denis Brogan should have been drawn back again to a reassessment of this central figure of the American historical drama is indicative, as Mr. Brogan points out, of a deep affinity between author and subject: 'Both were profound religious sceptics; both believed firmly in liberal democracy.' One might add that the religious scepticism in both had its roots in an ineluctable awareness of the religious dimension in human affairs and an ultimately sombre recognition of the limitations of human endeavour. Brogan's world view revelled in the diversity, perversity, and comedy of the human creation, but it remained at its core tragic and ironic. Behind and beyond the tireless exercises in analogy and induction which make his writings an endless source of intellectual stimulus there is, with varying degrees of explicitness, an assertion of ultimate incompatibilities, of the nemesis of pride, of the fallibility of all human contrivance.

Brogan was an Honorary LL.D. of Glasgow (1946) and an Honorary D.Litt. of Oxford (1969), and also held a number of honorary doctorates in France and the United States. He was an honorary fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1955. He was knighted in 1963. He was survived by his wife, Olwen, and by his children, Hugh, Patrick, Brian, and Elizabeth.

My thanks are due to Lady Brogan, Mr. Hugh Brogan, and Mr. W. F. R. Hardie for valuable information and help in the writing of this memoir.

H. G. NICHOLAS