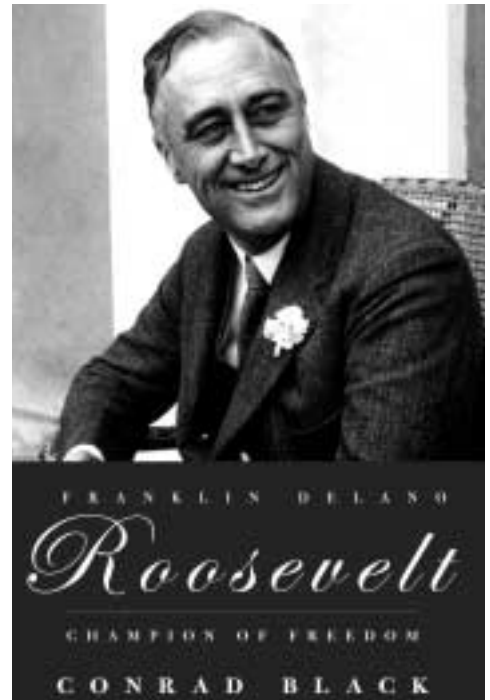


Conrad Black's democratic Caesar

Conrad Black, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom*. New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2003.

Review by Neil Cameron



Conrad Black's massive new biography of Franklin Roosevelt was published in the very week that its author was displaced from his position as CEO of Hollinger. The early newspaper reviews on both sides of the Atlantic thus inevitably devoted as much attention to the corporate travails of the author as to the substance of his work. The most common reaction to the latter was a mixture of surprised approval and puzzlement. Even Black's friends were startled by his chosen topic. From so notoriously combative and unequivocal a conservative, a life of Margaret Thatcher, perhaps of Disraeli or Lord Salisbury, would have raised no eyebrows. But Roosevelt? The 20th century's most quintessentially pragmatic American progressive?

To Black's visible satisfaction, the impact of his book was undoubtedly much increased by this element of the unexpected. His actual treatment of Roosevelt continued the surprise.

The book is not without flaws. It occasionally appears both too long and too short, opening at a leisurely pace and ending in a hurried rush, as if its author had started with the intention of writing a two-volume life, then run out of time or patience. On the other hand, it is a pleasure to read, despite its large size. It is not a definitive life of Roosevelt, but is the most entertaining one yet written, full of astute observations and aphorisms, and often very funny. Black has controlled his occasional weakness for asserting thumping platitudes with great solemnity, displaying here both lightness of touch and some distinctive historical argument. He not only displays real affection for Roosevelt, but makes use of his extensive primary sources to challenge the huge existing literature, mostly either highly partisan defences of FDR, or diatribes from attackers on the far left or far right.

By comparison, Black is balanced and fair, his revisions firmly based on his own reading of documents.

His intent in writing this book is quite easy to understand in the context of his whole career over the last three decades. Peter Newman's otherwise astute study of the first half of that career, written almost twenty years ago, was unsuitably entitled, *The Establishment Man*. While Black was born into wealth and privilege, neither his corporate activities nor his intellectual enthusiasms have been those of an "establishment" figure, in either Canada or Britain. What Black has always sought has been fame, fame in the 18th century sense of enduring individual reputation. An egoist and romantic, in both the 1970s and 1990s he was frequently as much at odds with the real political and cultural establishments of Canada and Britain as he was with the radical journalists on whom he

heaped his scorn. Like many egoists before and since, he is also essentially an amateur, in the Victorian aristocratic sense of that term, rejecting both business and intellectual professionalization.

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That also has made him a self-conscious anachronism, a man who formed his entire value system in the first half of the 20th century and who saw nothing in the second half that inclined him to change. Like the most ferociously polemical of the neoconservative columnists in his employ, Black has very little resemblance to the American conservatives of Roosevelt's era, like the isolationist Republican Robert Taft. Black's real allegiance, like Margaret Thatcher's, has been to a kind of anglo liberalism, the complex of ideas and emotions that united Englishmen, Americans and Canadians in the years of the Second World War, and more uncertainly in the first two decades that followed. Jointly forged by Churchill and Roosevelt, it was a liberalism that was centred on an "Atlanticist" alliance in international relations and in the conduct of war both hot and cold. Sometimes Black has made this nostalgic vision explicit. When he sold his Southam newspaper interests to the late Izzy Asper, he commented they had found more common ground than many outside observers assumed, as fellow "Louis St-Laurent Liberals."

This is the key to understanding why Franklin Roosevelt has been

rewarded with a genuinely admiring tribute from an arch-conservative. As a worshipper of power, Black has no difficulty in applying his imaginative historical sympathy to a patrician domestic reformer and Wilsonian

liberal internationalist. Black has always been less interested in biography as a search for his intellectual kin than as a vehicle for increasing his own reputation. Before he undertook his big book about Maurice Duplessis thirty years ago, he considered instead publishing a study of Lyndon Johnson.

The first two hundred pages of the book, on Roosevelt's early years at Groton and Harvard, and his truly heroic struggle to overcome being struck by polio, are largely similar to previous accounts. Black really hits his stride, however, with the following section, which deals with Roosevelt's victory over the Democratic Party at the start of the 1930s, and his relations with other major public figures like the

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American media tycoon, William Randolph Hearst. This is a splendid political analysis, the best ever provided of this part of Roosevelt's career.

Black is less persuasive on the effectiveness of the New Deal policies that Roosevelt applied to the Great Depression. He entirely accepts the

familiar claim that Roosevelt "saved capitalism from itself," and that this strategy saved the US from outright socialism. Even the extreme reactionaries who detested "that man" recognized Roosevelt's political ingenuity in restoring optimism and confidence to much of the American public, superbly communicated in his famous radio fireside chats. The real economic consequences of his alphabet-soup agencies are far more debatable, possibly doing as much to prolong the Depression as put a cheerier face on it. On this issue, Black does not sound like either a defender of statist liberalism or a contemporary conservative free marketer, but as something of a Machiavellian cynic, entranced by Roosevelt's ability to be both fox and lion.

He is very good again, however, on Roosevelt the lion, well before the wartime collaboration with Winston Churchill. He shows that Roosevelt was even earlier than Churchill in fully recognizing just how great a menace Hitler was. Roosevelt, for example, was already planning a massive expansion of military aircraft production by 1938, using Canada as an intermediary in providing support for Britain and France. On the wartime partnership

with Churchill, Black largely follows the countless examinations of it that have already been made. More interestingly, he provides a very detailed and funny account of FDR's difficulties in working with Charles de Gaulle.

Another of the book's surprises is that Black entirely rejects the criticism heaped on Roosevelt after his death,



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Conrad Black on FDR: "A genuinely admiring tribute from an arch-conservative...Black has no difficulty in applying his imaginative historical sympathy to a patrician domestic reformer and liberal internationalist." Not the definitive life of Roosevelt, "but the most entertaining one yet written."

including by Churchill, that the American president had been too willing to accommodate Stalin at Yalta. Black thinks most of these criticisms unrealistic, even given Roosevelt's deadly fatigue. He shows that Churchill played his own large part in this accommodation, and is more impressed by the underlying stability of the postwar political arrangements established by the Big Three. Like many English and anglophile American conservatives whose views of the world were formed in the first two decades after 1945, Black has reluctantly come to understand that Churchill, his fellow romantic and egoist, and a more heroic character than Roosevelt, was not the man who really dominated that age; he was the man whose brilliant wartime rhetoric and post-war historical account shaped its dominant mythology.

In this, Roosevelt was Churchill's more subtle, more politically adroit,

and sometimes more devious collaborator. His New Deal reforms, whatever their purely economic frailties, were a brilliant exercise in social psychology. He had gradually guided the American people away from an insular pacifism to a recognition of the threat to all of Western civilization presented by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. And once the Pearl Harbor attack brought America fully into the war, he had skilfully exercised the position of supreme commander over a vastly greater military and industrial power than anything available to either Hitler or Churchill, and firmly kept victory in the European war as his first priority, much to the annoyance of many of his military and naval commanders in the Pacific

Black concludes that Roosevelt was the most important man of the 20th century, something that has actu-

ally been in danger of being forgotten. The 20th century was so hypnotized by its great monsters, Stalin and Hitler, especially the latter, that its historians and biographers, especially non-American ones, have frequently underestimated FDR's enduring importance in shaping the whole world that emerged in the decades following his death. It was Roosevelt who preserved and expanded the world's faith in democracy and liberal political institutions, eventually providing a fundamental cause of the Western victory in the Cold War. Whatever Conrad Black's corporate misdoings, his unique background as a Canadian, a transplanted Briton, and an incarnation of egoist ambition, has given him the qualities to write an admirable life of another imperfect but admirable man.

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Conrad Black: Joe Biden: Mediocrity Personified. Bill Scher: How President Pence Would Blow Up 2020. Scott Walker: Dems Choose Politics Over Advancing Trade Deal. Previous. Next. Conrad Black. Author Archive. 2019 2018 2017 2016 2015 2014 2012 2011 2010 2009 2008. As Democrats Thrash, Trump Rises Above It All. Just when it seems that the quality of the Democratic candidates and the ethical standards of the Democratic media might start to rebound to normal civilized levels (not a high bar September 12, 2019. Trump's Only Real Weakness Is His Style.