

Commentary by Brian Hanley

Writing Lives, not Histories:

Geoffrey Perret's *Eisenhower* and the Art of Biography

. . . it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges.

—Plutarch, “Life of Alexander”

. . . the business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestick privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue.

—Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* 60

The first thing that strikes the reader of Geoffrey Perret's recently published *Eisenhower* is the pair of black-and-white photographs that grace the dust jacket. The image on the back of the jacket is a familiar one, a head-and-shoulder picture of the fifty-four-year-old Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force, wearing his U.S. Army-issue trench coat and service hat, framed by a grayish, indistinct but certainly outdoor background somewhere in France, as the jacket credits tell us. The photograph offers a side-view of General Eisenhower, his face turned toward the camera, sporting a grin. So famous is Ike's expression here that it represented then, as it does even today, what many prospective

buyers of Perret's volume might think of as the moment of High Noon in our country's history, a period in which America's exalted view of herself was more than justified by her achievements. Perret's narration of Eisenhower's arrival in England as commander of the European Theater of Operations, 24 June 1943, illustrates the point:

They had been waiting a long time for him; nearly three years, in fact. The British never expected to destroy Nazi Germany on their own. It would take the mightiest coalition in history to do that. But there were two related thoughts that sustained them through the darkest times. Hitler would never defeat them, and the United States could not stay out of the war indefinitely. One day, an American general would arrive an avatar in khaki, brass buttons and a rainbow smear of medal ribbons, the manifest form of the assurance of victory, with all the power of America at his back, and the forces of democracy would then possess the amassed strength that would save the world. (162)

Similarly panegyric things have been said about Eisenhower's two-term presidency (1952-60), which seemed to follow naturally from his achievements as architect of V-E Day and as the inaugural commander of NATO. A selection of items from Ike's own survey of his presidential accomplishments demonstrates that his eight years in the Oval Office proved to be nearly as exceptional as his military career: statehood for Alaska and Hawaii; the end of the Korean War; the largest reductions in taxes to that time; the first Civil Rights law in 80 years; prevention of Communistic efforts to dominate Iran, Guatemala, Lebanon, Formosa, South Vietnam; initiation of a Space Program with successful orbit in less than three years; initiation, and great progress in, the most ambitious interstate program by any nation in all history; the slowing and practical elimination of inflation; the initiation of a strong ballistic missile program; the use of Federal power to enforce orders of a Federal court in Arkansas, with no loss of life; the establishment of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (605-06).

The photograph gracing the front cover of Perret's volume is equally significant, but for a set of completely different reasons. Taken in 1915, the image is a profile of twenty-four-year-old Cadet Eisenhower, a senior at West Point of indifferent military and academic standing who very nearly was discharged from active duty because of a football injury. What vexed Cadet Eisenhower wasn't so much the prospect of not serv-

ing in the regular army—more than once he'd thought about leaving West Point—but that his damaged knee deprived him of the glories of college athletics (31, 34, 50). The Eisenhower pictured on the cover of Perret's book, then, is as ordinary as the Eisenhower on the back cover is mythogenic.

The historian is inevitably drawn to the Eisenhower depicted on the back of the dust jacket. Did General Eisenhower encourage pioneering logistical techniques in order to sustain his armies as they moved across France? To what extent was Eisenhower's command hamstrung by political considerations that are with us still today? Did Eisenhower's knowledge of the technological superiority of a handful Germany's weapons—the Messerschmitt 262, the V-1, the Tiger tank—alter allied strategy in important ways? The historian explores these issues, weighing the judgments of commanders and heads of state against the context in which they were made and, of course, the consequences of these decisions. We read history to firm our understanding of the world we live in by way of its antecedents, and to inform the political and economic choices we come to on contemporary issues. A well-written history also lays claim to our attention because we relish an intelligently conceived, dramatic narrative that is factual but as remote from our private lives as fable. We gain a vicarious thrill from reading about the exploits of motor torpedo boats in the Pacific Theater, without being immolated when a stray bullet hits the fuel tank, devoured by sharks when pitched overboard, or starved to death in an Imperial Japanese Army POW camp.

The biographer takes into account the work of the historian, but is driven to ask different sorts of questions, the answers to which encourage the newly-minted second lieutenant or the applicant to one of the service academies to discern the habits of mind, the qualities of character, that actuated the undistinguished cadet on the cover of Perret's book to become the five-star general. And—scarcely less important—the biographer's inquiries offer the non-specialist reader worthy lessons on human nature that transcend time, place, and profession.

No "species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition," observes Samuel Johnson in his *Rambler* commentary on biography. "We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure" (320).

The juxtaposition of the image of the youthful Eisenhower and that of the older on the dust jacket of Perret's biography is thus aptly chosen, profoundly expressive. Very few of us will ever experience the specific problems that confronted General or President Eisenhower, but the lives we lead or may lead are shaped by daily human pressures not much different from the ones that Ike understood himself as facing at nearly every stage of his life, as Perret's biography so amply demonstrates.

Ike's early life in particular proves that there is much more to the cultivation of greatness than the mere pursuit of image and credential building which modernity seems to prize so, what with the popularity of college guides that focus on the celebrity of a school at the expense of what is actually taught by professors and expected of students, career advice books that encourage readers to agonize over incidental things (should a vita be printed on ivory or saffron paper? Regimental and paisley ties are out, prints are in), and the like. By conventional standards Ike should not have amounted to anything special, at least as far as the army was concerned: he wasn't always a "team player," and he didn't much care about "looking the part." Perret's biography shows that Ike's illustrious career resulted from an admixture of courage, perseverance, ambition, as well as traits that are not obviously conducive to success in public life.

The years at the United States Military Academy were the most important of Eisenhower's early life, though this was not immediately apparent to Ike. As Ike grew older, his attitude to West Point went from frigid indifference—his graduation was a forlorn experience, as no family or friends attended the ceremony—to "pride and identity that no other place, not even Abilene, quite managed." On his deathbed, the seventy-eight-year-old Eisenhower talked mostly of West Point, saying nothing about his years as President, or his astounding career as an officer. That Ike's memoirs begin with the West Point years, Perret notes, is "an indirect way of saying that *here* was where his life really began—not in Abilene but at the Academy. He leaves Abilene till later; it becomes a flashback to the ritual and drama of the point" (45, 252). West Point had allowed Eisenhower to escape the narrow horizons which life in Abilene offered him. Even so, Ike remained uncertain as to what the future held for him or even whether he wanted to remain in the army.

At the time of his graduation Ike seemed largely unconscious of the extent to which his experiences as a West Point cadet had formed, or finished forming, the ways in which he viewed himself and the world.

“Sometimes he thought about quitting. Just walk away,” Perret writes as he discusses Eisenhower’s frame of mind in the fall of 1913, after injuring his knee. “Go to Argentina, maybe, and become a gaucho. Or how about the stage?” Ike mused. “He might even have a talent for it.” Ike decided to “stick it out” because the education was free; in fact his pay, however meager, allowed for him to “graduate with hundreds of dollars in savings, savings that he was steadily augmenting with his poker winnings.” Midway through his third year at West Point, that as Ike “looked to the future he saw only an invitation to hang on and plod through the next eighteen months and he was sure to graduate somewhere around the middle of his class—the Point’s equivalent of the gentleman’s C” (52-53). Cadet Eisenhower’s commitment to military service, then, did not burn quite so ardently as we might have imagined; nor would Ike’s love of gambling fit any quixotic image of the gestating Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, who was later known for his abstemiousness—he insisted on modestly appointed living quarters in Tunisia, London, and France—perseverance, and, to a lesser extent, priggishness, an example of which being his refusal to stop by for afternoon drinks with Truman at the White House because, “in his buttoned-up way,” he looked upon the practice as sordid (424).

Nevertheless, West Point managed to inspire young Ike in ironical ways, firing his latent, exuberant ambitiousness with its procrustean understanding of good order and discipline. Ike’s passive acceptance of the merits of staying on “didn’t allow for the itch,” Perret argues, for the Ike who as a child relished fighting his older and much stronger brother Edgar,

to be daring, to test his limitations and the boundaries of the world around him, to prove in some way that he was bigger than the dull curriculum, the tedious routines, the uninspiring faculty. Cadet regulations treated men like himself—old enough to vote and get married and sign legally binding contracts—as if they were incorrigibly shallow and dim. (53)

The cadet experience informed Ike’s perceptive understanding of leadership in similarly self-contradictory fashion. As a cadet corporal, Perret tells us, Ike was “authorized, even expected, to torment Beast Barracks plebes [newly enrolled cadets] as he had been tormented.” A particularly inept underling accidentally ran into Ike, and fell flat on his face.

Ike scornfully asked what occupation the cadet had worked at before entering West Point, adding a conventional dose of ridicule with the remark, "You look like a barber!" Acutely embarrassed, the cadet responded, "I *was* a barber, sir." As Perret relates,

Ike walked away ashamed. He had pulled ice in a creamery at nights and made grain bins from galvanized metal in the mid-day sun. The plebe was like him, a working stiff who had gotten here the hard way. Back in his room, he told Hodgson [his roommate], "I'm never going to crawl another plebe as long as I live. I've just done something that was stupid and unforgivable."

Perret adds, "Half a century later, it still bothered him that he hadn't apologized" (48-49). Thus, the general who reproached high-ranking subordinates, generals Mark Clark and Carl Spaatz, for reserving the best resorts in Capri and Sorrento for themselves and other officers while doing practically nothing for the enlisted men had taught himself vital lessons in the chivalric code some thirty years earlier (249).

In fact, Eisenhower's life as Perret tells it can be read as rebuke to shopworn ideas about what it is that greatness in public life demands. It seems that nowadays commonly accepted formulae for eminence might very well be modified or debunked by Eisenhower's example. There is, to begin with, Ike's modesty and bookishness, which put him at odds with the picture our modern world has of the great military, business, or athletic warrior, who is often thought of as the flamboyant practitioner of daredevil heroics who says little apart from the catchy kiss-off line ("Go ahead, make my day;" "Asta la vista, baby"). We see this idea reflected in the popular veneration of Donald Trump and Jesse Ventura, of certain sports figures known for their "trash talk," in the motion picture industry's casting of action heroes: John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, Chuck Norris, Clint Eastwood, Lou Gossett, Jr., Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Stephen Segal. The alternative view of the effective leader which has emerged in the past few years is that of the "Ten-Minute" manager, the bureaucrat, the Rolodex jockey who recites fluffy bromides of the sort one sees advertised as posters in airline general merchandize catalogues ("Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing;" "a ship is safe in its harbour, but that's not what it was built for;" "teamwork is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon

results;" "if you're not riding the wave of change, you'll find yourself beneath it," etc.).

Eisenhower fits none of these profiles. "The picture of Dwight, or Little Ike, does not show the rough-and-tumble jock that he yearned to be," Perret writes, describing Eisenhower's high-school yearbook photo, which is reprinted in the volume. "It is the image of a sensitive, watchful youth, a pouting and good-looking teenager who seems alert and intelligent. The caption under his picture says, 'Best Historian and Mathematician;' " the yearbook editors predicted that Ike "would become a professor of history at Yale" (31, 34). Ike also excelled in English class, a virtue that had more to do with his rise through the ranks during the inter-war years than any other trait, as Perret makes clear. "The War Department did not need a Hemingway or a poet laureate," Perret observes in discussing Ike's underlying worth from the perspective of his commanders, "but at a time [early 1930s] when the public was hostile to the military and its budget shrank from year to year, it desperately needed people who could explain what it was doing in language free from the irritating pomposity and irrelevant details that serve as mental props for the typical military bureaucrat" (108-09). Perret devotes a chapter, "The Flaming Pen," to the ways in which Ike's gifts as a careful reader and a writer of lucid prose helped him move from major to brigadier general, but his scholarly qualities plainly served him well throughout his career. It was Ike's passionate interest in famous commanders he'd read about in school—Hannibal, Napoleon, Washington—that propelled his interest in West Point (38). And as Perret informs us, President Eisenhower encouraged staff work that reflected the importance Ike attached to solid learning and eloquence. "Eisenhower was always interested in new ideas," Perret explains. "He regularly told his staff, 'I'm not the only person around here who gets ideas.' He filled his White House with writers and college instructors and bright young lawyers, hoping they would provide the intellectual ferment that would drive the new administration into the future" (435).

Ike's disciplined yet lively mind also led him to despise the primacy of regulations in army culture, which in his view generated a drab, unthinking conformity. As Perret notes, Ike's stubborn refusal to be hide-bound by regulations anticipated the direction military management would take over the next decades—Admiral Rickover's tenure as head of the Navy's nuclear-propulsion program in the 1950s comes to mind, as does the USAF's successful drive in the early 1990s to shrink the size of

its regulations as part of its “Paperless Air Force” campaign—but it almost brought his career to a disgraceful end. In 1920, Major Eisenhower had unknowingly collected a greater housing allowance than he had been entitled to. The Inspector General of the Army wanted to crucify him even though Ike apologized for his mistake and offered full restitution. Ike’s assertion that he hadn’t bothered to read the relevant regulations—he believed that intelligent officers would be better off relying on common sense and their own idea of prudent conduct—only aggravated matters. What saved Ike was his reputation for intellectual resourcefulness. Some time earlier, Ike had favorably impressed Brigadier General Fox Conner, a scholarly man himself, who asked the Army Chief of Staff to release Ike for duty on his staff. “Spinning around so fast that he nearly tied himself into a slipknot,” the IG decided that Ike “shouldn’t face a court-martial after all. Repayment and a formal reprimand would do” (82-83). Ike took away all the right lessons from the incident: as a five-star general, he is known to have advised at least one officer to ignore regulations for the same reasons Major Eisenhower did. The story should be considered carefully by soldiers who think that reading great books and perfecting the art of composition are activities unworthy of their time and who believe in the omniscience of writers of regulations.

Ike’s career, moreover, offers universally valid instruction in the antagonisms between professional aspirations and private life. Ike loved the army—in the late 1930’s when a military career might have seemed a dead end, Ike turned down a lucrative offer to write for the Hearst newspaper company—he venerated West Point, but he never allowed himself to become completely swallowed up by his profession. Even so, as promotion followed promotion, Ike found it increasingly difficult to keep the responsibilities of command from undermining his relations with his family (116-17). Less than a year after graduating from West Point, Ike was offered the chance to join the glamorous, better-paying aviation section of the Signal Corps; he turned down the opportunity because his fiancée wanted him to have nothing to do with the risk-laden flying business (63). Nearly three decades later, we find that generalship had changed Ike in subtle but decisive ways. In early 1944, Ike returned to the United States for a brief visit after a prolonged absence. To his family and friends he seemed edgy, aloof, emotionally distant; everyone could see that Ike was anxious to get back to his work even though he had not seen his loved ones in many months and, once

he left, would not see them for many more (250-54). Perret discusses the episode sympathetically but the lesson, clearly enough, is that such tension is inevitable. That it didn't wreck the Eisenhower's marriage or lead to the estrangement of Ike from his son John, who was a senior at West Point at the time, is a testament to Ike's underlying wisdom and humanity. Lesser men and women—who might be Ike's managerial equal or superior—are defeated by challenges of this sort every day. That Ike managed to retain a robust private identity finds expression in the arrangements he made for his funeral and interment. Ike asked to be buried in a "standard eighty-eight dollar Army coffin," and he assumed that there would be a state funeral held in Washington, D.C. But Ike also insisted that a second funeral be held in his native Abilene, Kansas. He would be laid to rest in a cemetery near his family home, with adjacent plots for his wife, who died in 1979, and his first-born son, Doud Dwight, who had died in 1921 at the age of thirty-nine months (607).

The focus of my essay thus far has been on Perret's subject and, correspondingly, on the value of biography as a genre. Here and there I have referred appreciatively to Perret's skill as a biographer, but I have paid scant attention to the specifics of his craft. Eisenhower's life may have been an engrossing one for all of the reasons discussed previously, but the prospective book buyer might very well ask: why shell out \$35 for Perret's book given that Stephen Ambrose's comprehensive two-volume biography, which appeared in 1984, stands as the definitive work on Eisenhower? Perret's answer in his acknowledgments page is that the recent availability of consequential primary materials and the emergence of fresh scholarship together offer "valuable new insights into Eisenhower's extraordinary abilities as both a military commander and as a President" (ix). Perret makes great use of interviews with Ike's son, John S.D. Eisenhower, for instance, and lately published studies of Montgomery, Churchill, and others, which along with his sparing references to Ambrose's biography—Ambrose's *Eisenhower* appears in twelve footnotes out of a total of some 1,400—remove any serious suspicion that Perret's volume is derivative of its authoritative predecessor in substantive ways. But there are additional, equally valid justifications for reconsidering the life of Eisenhower which Perret doesn't mention, though his volume does a fine job addressing these reasons.

To begin with, the likely readership of Perret's *Eisenhower* differs significantly from that of Ambrose's biography. The book-buying public

almost certainly includes a smaller proportion of men and women who lived through the Eisenhower years as adults and who could say that they experienced Eisenhower's leadership firsthand. It is well known that the World War II generation is now departing the scene—a thousand members, or so of Tom Brokaw's "Greatest Generation" pass away daily. Thus, Perret's diligently researched and lucidly written account is most welcome if it manages to introduce Ike to a generation of Americans who, in all probability, know next to nothing about him if the many recent surveys documenting the monstrous historical ignorance of college-aged men and women are anything to go by.

More importantly, the intervening sixteen years have given both Perret and his readers a more refined perspective on Eisenhower and his age, showing Eisenhower to have been prescient on some issues and unduly worried about others to a degree that Ambrose, given the historical moment when he wrote his biography, could not possibly have apprehended. Take, for instance, Ike's disquiet at the arrival of what we think of nowadays as the "Sixties" culture. Perret's penultimate chapter begins with Ike riding in the back of the presidential limousine, July 7 1959, musing about the dishevelment that seems to have sprung up suddenly as he surveys the tourists crowding the National Archives building. "In the Army, he had learned to tell a lot from a little," Ike thinks to himself, and what "he sees now trouble him. Why are they so badly dressed? And why don't they stand up straight, walk with their shoulders squared? From the look of it, something bad is happening to Americans' self-respect" (585). The nascent social slovenliness which troubled Ike matured and then ran amok between 1968 and 1975, but it had receded somewhat by the mid 1980s, when Ambrose's biography appeared. It is worth recalling that while Ike's successor John F. Kennedy was the first President not to wear a hat to his inauguration, thus reflecting and extending sartorial informality, Ronald Reagan refused to remove his suit jacket while in the Oval Office. And it was not at all unusual in the early 1980s for the up-and-coming business executive to make sure he dressed in a three-piece suit every day, the buttoned-down corporate culture in those days being gloriously exemplified by IBM, whose founder Thomas J. Watson was a friend of Ike's. Even so, today there is good reason to respect Ike's point of view given America's growing discomfort with the nation's studied amnesia in regards to conventional good manners and appearance—in some quarters of the business world "Dress-down Friday" has now metastasized into "Casual Thursday"—as

expressed in the increasingly noisy calls to bring back public school dress codes, the robust sales of etiquette guides, and so on.

On other subjects Ike is less perceptive than he might have appeared in 1984. Eisenhower's denunciation of what he termed in his farewell address as the "military-industrial complex" doubtless seemed enduringly relevant to readers of Ambrose's biography (599). After all, Pentagon procurement scandals—the \$1,000 toilet seats; the \$600 hammers and the \$18 nails they were meant to strike; the Babylonian price tags that accompanied missile systems that supposedly could never be programmed to shoot straight—were something of a staple of nightly news broadcasts, a circumstance given further notoriety by President Reagan's massive military build-up between 1981 and 1985. Readers of Perret's biography may rightly interpret Ike's outlook as plausible at the time but, all things considered, the circumstance he bemoaned proved to be an aberration in American history. The end of the Cold War brought with it the collapse or consolidation of many of the giant corporations that specialized in military hardware; the armed services are about one-third smaller than they were even nine years ago—the U.S. Air Force today stands as about the size it was at its creation in 1947, following the post-World War II demobilization; there hasn't been a military draft in nearly thirty years; and, increasingly, fewer members of Congress have any direct experience with military life. Indeed, experts often compare the diminished standing of the modern military with the armed forces of the quiescent 1920s and 1930s.

Perret's manner of proceeding is straightforward, beginning with Ike's birth in north Texas and his early life in Abilene, Kansas, proceeding to the West Point experience, and his rise through the ranks during the inter-war years. Ike was promoted to brigadier general in the autumn of 1941, a few weeks before the Pearl Harbor attack and twenty-six years after graduating from West Point. Three years later he was awarded his fifth star, five months or so before Germany surrendered. The remaining two-fifths of the six-hundred-page narrative is taken up largely by Ike's service as President. In the latter portion of the book Perret also touches upon Ike's indifferent performance as president of Columbia University and his tour of duty as commander of NATO in the late 1940s. The biography concludes with a short chapter on Ike's retirement years, spent mostly on his farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Eisenhower is worth anyone's money—student of history, military buff, and the avocational reader alike. Perret's scholarship is thorough and

reliable, yet free from even the slightest trace of pedantry. For those familiar with the events of World War II, chapters twelve through twenty-six provide a neat review of the major events of General Eisenhower's various commands, delivered for the most part in limpid prose. The non-specialist reader, meanwhile, is given a substantive introduction to the material without being overtaxed by drawn-out discussions of battles, strategies, and the like. The commentary on the allied army's breakout from Normandy in the summer and autumn of 1944, for instance, is disposed of with exemplary deftness. Perret's delineations of Eisenhower's contemporaries are similarly efficient and discerning. Winston Churchill "could be as funny as a professional comedian, as moving as a great actor, witty if the occasion was ripe for wit, nostalgic to the point of tears when in a reminiscent mood, and armed with both a memory for poetry and an orator's gift for the inspirational utterance," Perret writes. "He had lead a life crammed with drama and incident, and was romantic even at his most calculating and manipulative. Bald, pink and cherubic, in his siren suit [an azure blue coverall] he looked like an overgrown baby who had somehow picked up a cigar" (167).

Perret's evenhandedness also warrants praise; he plainly admires Ike and doubtless means to encourage us to do so as well, but he does not shrink from illuminating Ike's weaknesses and misjudgments. Ike, whom we prefer to think of as genial and placid, was given to outbursts of anger that went beyond all reason. "Behind the friendly grin there was another man," Perret explains in his commentary on Ike's White House years, "one who didn't simply shout and swear when he got angry but seemed almost on the verge of a sulfurous vanishing act, disappearing in the flames and smoke of spontaneous combustion." Perret goes on: "Such Bessemer incidents might erupt at almost any time, triggered by trivial incidents more often than not" (529-30). Ike's emotions could swing in the opposite direction. General Eisenhower, for instance, allowed sentiment to infect his understanding on gravely serious matters. "Eisenhower repeatedly lectured senior commanders that they must be ruthless with officers who had failed and put friendship aside, yet he was deaf to his own advice when it came to Mark Clark," who attended West Point with Eisenhower. "Clark had done nothing to curb his overweening vanity, but Eisenhower looked the other way. His Salerno plan was abysmal and courted disaster. Ike ignored that. Under pressure, Clark had shown terrible misjudgment. That, too, was ignored," Perret points out.

“Ike indulged the mistakes of Major General Lloyd Fredendall in much the same way” (205, 239).

Eisenhower is neither captious nor adulatory, but apologetic. Perret controverts defamatory legends surrounding Ike, even as he does not refrain from exploring less commendable aspects of his life. The canard that Ike and his English driver, Kay Summersby, conducted an affair is refuted with an avalanche of evidence. Summersby herself advances the idea that she and Ike were lovers in her memoir, *Past Forgetting* (1976). Perret’s judgment of her claim is blunt, devastating. “The back story to *Past Forgetting* was that Kay was dying of cancer and, in the grip of certain death, was reviewing a life that was a tale of failure and disappointment. She had wasted so many opportunities and privileges that her life almost cried out for a redeeming experience, something powerful enough, dramatic enough, to lift it above the dismal truth” (216). Perret is similarly persuasive in his evaluation of Ike’s alleged indifference to the civil rights crusades of the 1950s. Evidence can be found in the social isolation the Eisenhower’s faced in the aftermath of federal enforcement of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. On the Eisenhower’s “first visit to Augusta National [their favorite vacation spot] following the forced integration of Little Rock Central High, he and Mamie had been met with hostile glances, not spontaneous applause, by sullen silence instead of southern hospitality” (542-ff; 602). Perret makes clear that segregationists could never have looked upon Ike as a friend to their cause.

Perret’s *Eisenhower* is, like its subject, certainly praiseworthy but not without faults—all of which, however, can be characterized as venial rather than mortal. The index is on the whole adequate but, for at least a few items, irritatingly idiosyncratic. We are given the page numbers for Ike’s promotion to brigadier general and to four-star general, but no reference is provided for his selection to five-star general, an achievement Ike shared with only a handful of other commanders in American history. The “United States Military Academy” receives four references, yet page 45—which contains Ike’s deathbed remarks about the primacy of West Point in his life—is not listed, though aspects of his day-to-day life discussed on pages 44 and 47 are. The Battle of the Bulge is not to be found, though Bastogne and Saint-Vith appear: why not list these two locations under the more familiar battle name?

Perret writes very well indeed; his prose carries a considerable amount of information while almost never calling attention to itself. Even so,

Perret now and then capitulates to the histrionic impulse. Unfortunately for the bookstore browser, who may put the volume down after spending twenty seconds with *Eisenhower*, the opening sentence illustrates very well Perret's occasional rhetorical flamboyance: "Under a starless sky that heaved and cracked, every crash of thunder that broke over Denison, Texas, that October night [14 October 1890, Ike's birthday] rolled down the broad valley of the Red River, shaking the cheap little clapboard houses plunked down beside the steel tracks that followed the river's course" (3). Perhaps it might not have sufficed to say that Ike was born on a stormy October night in a cramped, squalid bungalow in Denison, Texas? The tone here seems more appropriate to a Gothic novel or worse, a parody of a Gothic novel. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that grandiloquence of this sort appears rarely in *Eisenhower*; its presence is highlighted by Perret's otherwise clear, expressive, unlabored prose in the service of an estimable study of a consequential public figure.

Perret's volume represents an achievement greater than its necessarily limited but wholly meritorious contribution to our understanding of Eisenhower and his age—Ambrose's biography remains, as Perret himself acknowledges, *sui generis*. Perret's *Eisenhower* exemplifies the value of biography to the common reader—most especially the intelligent young who mean to attend or who do attend the nation's military academies or who serve in the armed forces as junior officers.

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