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## **Winston Churchill, Coniston (1906)**

Birth: November 10, 1871, St. Louis, Missouri.

Death: March 12, 1947, Winter Park, Florida.

Winston Churchill's Coniston (1906) tells the story of Granite State politics in the era of Progressive reform. Part of a political trend most famously represented by Theodore Roosevelt and a literary tradition of muckrakers and naturalistic novels exposing conditions in stockyards and mills, Coniston is a New Hampshire tale with vivid personalities and an appreciation for New Hampshire's political traditions and contemporary political corruption involving the Boston and Maine Railroad. As such, it is part of a group of books that have claimed significance for New Hampshire's culture on a national stage, from Sarah Josepha Hale's Northwood, Daniel Webster's speeches, Denman Thompson's The Old Homestead, Robert Frost's New Hampshire, Thornton Wilder's Our Town, to John Knowles's A Separate Peace and W. D. Wetherell's The Wisest Man in America. Indeed, the New Hampshire presidential primary puts local political culture under the national microscope every four years, and the state's reputation for grass roots politics and local party leaders with great influence lead the producers of television's The West Wing to feature New Hampshire scenes. Coniston shares with many of these works a rather nostalgic view of New Hampshire as a repository of American values, even as it shows the corruptions of institutions from the local school board and town meeting to the state and national capitals. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The God who made New Hampshire / Taunted the lofty land / With little men," and Churchill questions how leaders can rise above their little interests to affirm the public good.

Winston Churchill sets Coniston in the 1840s-1870s in Coniston, a fictionalized Croydon, with scenes in Newport, Claremont, Cornish, with the evocative natural setting of the Sugar River and Mt. Ascutney. Major political action takes place in Concord's Eagle Hotel, State House, and opera house. Churchill knew these places well, since he had moved to Cornish and built an estate, Harlakenden House, in 1899, joining the art colony there of artists Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Kenyon Cox, Maxfield Parrish, and architect Charles A. Platt. Born in St. Louis, Churchill gained great fame as the author of historical fiction, Richard Carvel (1899), a Revolutionary War naval adventure story, and The Crisis (1901), a story of Civil War St. Louis. His fame was so great that the English Winston Churchill wrote him in 1899 to say that he would henceforth sign his name Winston Spencer Churchill to distinguish himself from the more famous American. These historical fictions lead him to politics, for, in the words of critic Warren Titus, "He also felt the novel could heighten their interest in government and educate them about the privileges and responsibilities they enjoyed as members of the Anglo-Saxon community."

A meeting with then Vice President Roosevelt in 1901 impelled him to take action to join the political fray in his adopted state. Surely he was motivated by Roosevelt and by what he saw as the abuse of government in New Hampshire, but he was not a hard-edged reformer who would overthrow capitalism nor challenge the premise that Anglo-Saxon educated and cultured elites are naturally fit to lead the masses. In this stance, he is allied to the Colonial Revival movement which nostalgically looked back to Republican-era New England political and cultural traditions to reform an urbanized, immigrant-filled nation. The immediate context for the novel was Churchill's experiences as a New Hampshire legislator, 1903-05, and candidate for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1906. Churchill's interest in politics continued through his support of reformer Robert Perkins Bass in 1910 and another run for the office of governor, as the candidate of the Bull-Moose Progressive party. His rented his Cornish home twice to President Woodrow Wilson to serve as a summer White House. In reflecting on his naivete as a new state legislator, Churchill wrote, "I went down to Concord and was received most cordially by the politicians. There has never been any question of their cordiality, except when I tried to interfere in politics, and then they told me firmly but politely that that was forbidden ground for a disinterested citizen. . . . If I tried to talk politics I was told a funny story. I was not trusted" (quoted in Titus, 64-65). He found Governors N. J. Batchelder and John McLane and party leader George Higgins Moses in the thrall of Boston and Maine Railroad president Tuttle who approved all candidates for major office and legislative committee appointments. One magazine writer commented that Tuttle ran the state "with a degree of absolutism not equaled by the rule of the Russian Czar" (Schneider, 139). The press was of little help, since Batchelder's brother-in-law edited the Manchester Mirror and Moses edited the Concord Evening Monitor. The railroad influenced legislators by providing free passes, and the passes given to the state's lawyers constituted a retainer so the lawyer could not represent anyone who sued the company for accidents at unmarked crossroads and elsewhere. Churchill did have allies, such as former governor F. W. Rollins, now head of the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests and former U. S. senator William E. Chandler. Churchill introduced bills on forest protection, auto speed limits, and, a local favorite, the elimination of tolls on the Cornish-Windsor bridge, and then left for research for his next novel. When he returned in May, all his bills had been eliminated in committee. Thus his experience in Concord was the immediate context for his novel set decades earlier. During his campaign in 1906, he remarked, "That book is my platform" (Blodgett, 512).

Coniston tells the story of Jethro Bass, a local tanner who builds political influence and subsequent bribery and corruption by buying up mortgages and then controlling a host of political lieutenants who hold mortgages in their regions. Bass woos Cynthia Ware, the daughter of the local minister, whose family represents the traditional culture of political deference to elites. Tellingly, she loans him a biography of Napoleon, but she breaks off the courtship when Bass refuses to give up his scheme to take over town affairs in the name of Jacksonian democracy. Another suitor for Cynthia is Isaac Worthington, who arrives in Newport from Massachusetts with a plan to start woolen mills. Cynthia marries William Wetherell of Boston, a clerk and minor poet, who moves, after Cynthia's death, to Coniston with their daughter Cynthia. By this time, Bass has become boss of the state, and he exercises his power in the infamous "Woodchuck Session" of the legislature. By trickery, Bass has convinced legislators opposed to the

extension of Worthington's railroad to go to a production of Uncle Tom's Cabin while rural representatives debate a bill about Woodchuck control. He secretly achieves a quorum of his supporters and passes the bill. Despite this success, Bass knows that vast corporate powers will eventually buy power in the state and eliminate local bosses such as himself. As Churchill writes of Bass's place in the evolution of democracy from the Federalist and Republican era and Jacksonian democracy, to the rule of corporations:

Certain gentlemen, with a pious belief in democracy, but with a firmer determination to get on top, arose,—and got on top. So many of these gentlemen arose in the different states, and they were so clever, and they found so many chinks in the Constitution to crawl through and steal the people's chestnuts, that the Era may be called the Boss-Era. After the Boss came along certain Things without souls, but of many minds, and found more chinks in the Constitution: bigger chinks, for the Things were bigger, and they stole more chestnuts. (Coniston, 1)

The final battle among Bass, Worthington, and the railroads begins with a squabble over the appointment of a local postmaster, a job Bass has promised to disabled Civil War veteran, Ephraim Prescott. Bass takes Prescott and Cynthia Wetherell, who has become his ward upon her father's death, to Washington. On this trip, we see New York as a teeming immigrant city of riches and poverty mixed. There is the “worst cruelty of all—the cruelty of selfishness. Every man going his own pace, seeking to gratify his own aims and desires, unconscious and unheedful of the want with which he rubs elbows” (Coniston, 353). She isn't so aware of the corruption of Jethro Bass, for he seems to have a good heart in helping her and Ephraim Prescott. To outfox his political rivals, Bass arranges for a “chance” meeting outside the White House with Grant, likely to be interested in a pretty girl and a fellow veteran. Bass closes the deal in a later meeting with Grant. Another battle is also underway, as Bob Worthington, Isaac's son, begins to court Cynthia, but her lowly family status and her association with Bass mean his father will object. Here Churchill links courtship with politics to show the potential corruption of the first as well as the potential salvation of the second through love.

Needing to remove Cynthia from the fray, he places her in a Boston school, but she is asked to leave when papers controlled by Worthington print an expose of Bass's corrupting influence on New Hampshire. Cynthia, like her mother before her, confronts Bass, and this time he confesses and withdraws from politics to retain her love. She takes a teaching position nearby, but Worthington overplays his hand when he has her fired. Bass returns to the political fray in a final battle to stop consolidation of the state's five railroads. The book shows Concord at its worst, with Jethro Bass's “Throne Room” of operations at the Pelican House, the Eagle Hotel, opposed by the railroad salon whence bribes, railroad passes, cigars, and liquor flow. Churchill describes the scene:

We have to sing the song of sixpence for the last time in these pages; and as it is an old song now, there will be no encores. If you can buy one member of the lower house for ten dollars, how many can you buy for fifty? It was no such problem in primary arithmetic that Mr. Balch and his associates had to solve—theirs was in higher mathematics, in permutations and combinations, and in least squares. No wonder the old campaigners speak with tears in their eyes of the days of that ever memorable summer.

There were spoils to be picked up in the very streets richer than the sack of thirty cities; and as the session wore on it is affirmed by men still living that money rained down in the Capitol Park and elsewhere like manna from the skies, if you were one of a chosen band. . . . Some men are so valuable that they can be bought twice, or even three times, and they make figuring complicated. (Coniston, 495-96)

Meanwhile, back in Coniston, Cynthia's job is restored through a surprise return of her mother's teacher, the now famous Miss Lucretia Penniman, a character based on Newport's Sarah Josepha Hale, author of Northwood and editor of Godey's Ladies Book. Here she is a champion of women's rights as well as village justice, and she places the mantle of the "New Woman" on Cynthia. The "New Woman" of the early 1900s thought for herself, sought economic opportunities, and supported woman suffrage, despite Jethro Bass's advice that women and politics don't mix. Worthington loses the school battle and the railroad battle, until a late-night meeting with Bass in which Bass trades support for the consolidation bill for Worthington's acceptance of Bob and Cynthia's marriage. With this deal sealed, Bass retires to Coniston where Cynthia reads to him from his favorite books, the life of Napoleon and Robinson Crusoe, and where he eventually enjoys the company of her children.

This happy ending may have satisfied his romantically inclined readers, but the cost of this marriage is a state abandoned to corruption and control by corporate interests far more venal and powerful than Jethro Bass. Churchill's desire for a romantic resolution of political and economic conflicts and large historical forces embodies his own hopes and perhaps those of the Progressives who yearn for simpler times of domestic tranquility. This ending, however, defers attention from the Besses and Worthington's who don't have a soft spot for feminine and aesthetic influence. The book shows power to be based on force, class, labor, race, and capital, but it does little to suggest how government or virtuous Anglo-Saxons should use power to address injustice and corruption. Nor does it address the complex motivations of common people, their desires and their exercise of political power, the people who see the opulence and greed of an Isaac Worthington and say, "But I was only thinkin' how nice it would be to be rich" (Coniston, 128).

If Coniston couldn't win the governorship for Churchill, it certainly contributed to the wave of reform that crested with the election of Robert Perkins Bass in 1910. Railroad passes were eliminated, a Public Service Commission was established, and bills for direct primaries, tax lobbying, and child labor reform were passed. The power of the Boston and Maine was waning in these years, and it withdrew from politics after acquisition by the New Haven Railroad in 1910. Theodore Roosevelt wrote to Churchill, "I think you were dealing with one of the real and great abuses of this generation. I do not know whether I abhor most the wealthy corruptionist, or the sinister demagogue who tries to rise by exciting, and appealing to, the evil passions of envy and jealousy and hatred. In the last analysis the two supplement one another." The book was good for tourism and the New Hampshire image, as the Croydon store renamed itself "Coniston," a line of Coniston women's suits were produced, and reviewers praised the book's depiction of New England villages and scenery. Some New Hampshire politicians resented Churchill's seeming opportunism in using the book to fuel his political

ambitions and/or using his political experience to enhance his literary career. Others objected to his depiction of Ruel Durkee of Croydon as Jethro Bass. William E. Chandler went so far as to publish a critical pamphlet, Jethro Bass Unreal. The novel did put the spotlight of reform on the state, famously focused a few years later in the devastating child labor photographs in New Hampshire factories by Lewis Hine.

Winston Churchill's sequel to Coniston tells the contemporary story of the Boston and Maine Railroad's control of New Hampshire politics in Mr. Crewe's Career (1908) by drawing on with wit and irony his own experiences in the New Hampshire legislature and as a gubernatorial candidate in 1906. He returns to New Hampshire themes, the degradation of industrial workers in conflicts between management and unions, in The Dwelling-Place of Light (1917). Churchill wrote another hugely popular novel, about moral corruption in the church, The Inside of the Cup (1913; film version 1923), but after 1920 he lost interest in writing and his reputation had faded by the time of his death in 1947.

Coniston resonates today for its depiction of political and business types, such as Jethro Bass and Isaac Worthington, as well as for its analysis of the continuing American struggle in representative democracy among interest groups and economic forces. New Hampshire readers will find in the story of the power of the railroads a mirror for recent struggles over the proposed Onassis refinery in Durham, defeated through grass-roots organizing, town meeting, and the principle of home rule against the power of the governor and the Manchester Union Leader. A different outcome with a new cast of players surrounded the construction of Seabrook Station. Most political commentators would add an age of lobbyists to the eras of political power outlined by Churchill. Some may find comedy in his comment that in New Hampshire the Democratic ticket proves "the right of the unfit to hold office" (Coniston, 48). New Hampshire is still challenged by Churchill's concluding words: "Thus the duty rests to-day, more heavily than ever, upon each American citizen to make good to the world those principles upon which his government was built. . . . In America to-day we are trying—whatever the cost—to regain the true axis established for us by the founders of our Republic" (573).

### Discussion Questions.

1. Is the portrait of small town politics, school boards, and town meetings still true today? In what ways?
2. Does Churchill's presentation of the stages of political life in American make sense? Do we see a continuing presence of these forms of politics today in various campaigns for state office, issues before the legislature, and in the presidential primary? Can you associate any of today's political leaders with any of the characters, good and bad, in the novel?
3. Why does New Hampshire seem to be a useful setting for the discussion of American political values? What traditions of freedom and government are particularly associated with the state?
4. In what ways do you think New Hampshire government still works well today, and in what ways does it seem to be influenced by powerful forces inside and outside of the state.
5. How do you like the main characters, such as Jethro Bass, Cynthia Wetherell, Isaac and Bob Worthington, Bijah Bixby, Heth Sutton, etc.?

### Suggestions for Further Reading:

George P. Baker, The Formation of the New England Railroad Systems (Cambridge, 1937).

Geoffrey Blodgett, "Winston Churchill: The Novelist as Reformer," New England Quarterly 47 (December, 1974): 495-517.

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Wade Hall, "Winston Churchill," Nineteenth-Century American Fiction Writers, Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 202 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1999): 81-86.

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Robert W. Schneider, Novelist to a Generation: The Life and Thought of Winston Churchill (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976).

Warren I. Titus, Winston Churchill (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1963).

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