Reviews

Books


In his first major book, Childhood and Society, published in 1950 when Erik Erikson was forty-eight years old, he offers this well known observation, “All I have to offer is a way of looking at things.” From the vantage point of almost a half-century later his “way of looking at things” appears to have withstood the test of time. Ushered into the psychoanalytic movement in the 1920s and early 1930s, Erikson knew Sigmund Freud and his circle even as he underwent training analysis with Anna Freud on his way to becoming a child analyst. What W.H. Auden said of Freud could easily be said of Erikson, that he created “a whole climate of opinion.” Among other things, Erikson’s vast influence arose from his convincing revision of Freud’s developmental framework to include eight stages, with attention to cultural as well as sexual factors in ego development.

Lawrence Friedman’s important new biography of Erikson chronicles his life beginning with his birth out of wedlock to a mother he adored and a biological father whose identity he never knew. The author describes his youthful wandering in Europe and his subsequent adoption into the psychoanalytic movement in Freud’s Vienna. Erikson then emigrated to the America of Franklin D. Roosevelt in response to the threat imposed by the growth of National Socialism with all that it ominously portended for those who shared his Jewish roots. Erikson then began a career as a therapist and teacher at a variety of prestigious settings in his new country. He emerged only later in the 1960s as a public intellectual with a luminous reputation as a biographer of prominent figures.

The writing of this detailed study involved the author’s direct access to his subject in old age up to his death in 1994, to members of his family, and to his circle of friends and colleagues. In spite of his achievements and his public persona as a repository of spiritual and therapeutic wisdom, Erikson is also pictured as crafty, vain, insecure, stubborn, and at points clearly disturbed. Whatever his warts, he succeeded in moving beyond his European cultural origins to professional maturity and public acclaim as the “American Cen-
"identity reached its zenith. It is from this reserve of accumulated cultural and personal experience that his concept of identity emerged to capture the collective imagination.

Friedman's approach to this life is clear headed and even handed. With all of Erikson's triumphs, still there were losses and public controversies. First, there was the feminist critique of his depiction of "inner space" as the domain of woman and the source of her unique gifts. The author shares his view of the weaknesses of some of his later writing when compared, for example, to *Gandhi's Truth* and *Young Man Luther*. The reader is also reminded of the fierce attack following the publication of an extended autobiographical essay anthologized in *Life History and the Historical Moment*, where critics questioned what they perceived as Erikson's ambivalence about the Jewish part of his mixed cultural and religious heritage. Startling, too, is the dramatic picture of Erikson and his wife, Joan, making a quick decision to institutionalize their newborn son, Neil, diagnosed with Down's syndrome, rather than caring for him at home.

How did Erik Erikson manage to contain all this? Friedman follows Robert Coles' earlier analysis by identifying Erikson's capacity for flexibility in his facility for thriving "on the boundary." "On the Boundary" is the title of an autobiographical essay written in 1936 by Erikson's friend, the theologian Paul Tillich. He, like Erikson, was an emigrant from Hitler's Europe who appears to have had the same relationship to the church as Erikson did to the psychoanalytic establishment. Both had professional roots in these institutions, and yet they did not fit into convenient niches nor did they feel comfortable with any externally imposed role definition. In living "on the boundary" of cultures, eras, and disciplines Erikson derived the energy and strength to overcome obstacles even as he became a spokesperson for his own theoretical formulations.

Friedman advises a close reading of Erikson's original texts rather than relying on secondary sources in order to gain a fuller understanding of the quest for identity which Erikson defined as a search for a sense of "continuity and sameness and the ability to act accordingly." This definition summarizes Erikson's personal myth which he raised to the level of general application and public awareness. He understood the implications for this myth. He wrote about it. He proclaimed it as teacher and public sage. He used it as a vehicle for the healing of others. In some quarters, he was vilified for it. Most of all, he meant it.

Lawrence Friedman's remarkable biography permits its reader to know "identity's architect" in an intimate, enduring, fair, and comprehensive way.

Curtis W. Hart, M.Div.
Director of Pastoral Care and Education
New York Presbyterian Hospital—Cornell Campus
Lecturer in Medicine, Weill Medical College, Cornell University