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Kieran Williams, *Critical Lives: Václav Havel*. Reaktion Books, London, 2016. £11.99. ISBN 978-1-78023-6650. 238 pp.

“At least ten books have been written about me, including the book by John Keane, which I have not read just as I will not read any other books about me, of which there are now about ten,” said Václav Havel to me on 15th October 1999 when I asked him to comment on John Keane's revelation, made in his monograph on Havel (1999) that Havel had promised Alexander Dubček, the Czechoslovak Communist Party leader during the 1968 Prague Spring, that he would support his candidature for President, but then reneged on it. (Source: <https://blisty.cz/files/isarc/9910/19991018f.html>)

Havel was of course right: there are many monographs on him. There are the adulatory accounts by Eda Kriseová (1991) and James Pontuso (2004). There is the above-mentioned highly readable but critical work by John Keane (1999), there are works by Czech authors Daniel Kaiser (2009, 2014), Martin C. Putna (2011) and Jiří Suk (2013) as well as the recent biography, penned in English by Havel's close collaborator and ally, former Czech Ambassador to the UK Michael Žantovský (2014). Why then, was there a need to write yet another biography of Václav Havel? What does Kieran Williams add to this voluminous body of work?

Kieran Williams's work is a masterpiece of succinct expression. Williams has divided Havel's life and work into seven separate chapters and discusses his philosophy, the meaning of his writings and the impact of his political work in a clear but extremely economical way. This is to be admired: Williams includes almost everything that is relevant and important about Havel's life and work, but does it in a minimalist way, often summing up a major controversy clearly and concisely in a single sentence. His biography of Havel is based on meticulous study of the existing literature on Havel, including all the archive materials. Considerable attention is given to the meaning of Havel's plays, political essays and speeches, but the detailed study of archive materials has also yielded various, as yet unknown little gems of information.

It is of course well known that Václav Havel was, in his youth, both embarrassed and handicapped by the fact that he was born into a family of extremely rich Prague entrepreneurs. It was perhaps not generally well known, as Williams points out, that the entrepreneurial success of Havel's grandfather Václav and his father Václav Maria (who were both extremely successful architects and builders of major landmarks in Prague, such as the first ferro-concrete entertainment palace Lucerna and the high-class restaurant Barrandov Terraces) was based on personal political connections. The business empire of Havel's uncle Miloš operated on the same principles, says Williams.

In inter-war Czechoslovakia and during the Nazi occupation, Miloš Havel was the embodiment of the Czechoslovak film industry. He created the Barrandov Film Studios and when he found himself under pressure from the Nazis in 1939 to give up the studios to them, he managed to negotiate a compromise, as a result of which he was able to produce fifty Czech-language feature films during the Nazi occupation, often on Czech nationalist themes. During the war, he was also able to protect a large number of Czech writers and artists, frequently of a left-wing persuasion, from being sent to hard labour in Germany. Nevertheless, after the war, the communists confiscated his film empire and Miloš Havel ended up as an emigré in Munich where he eventually died in poverty. Even his business enterprise was based on personal connections in Prague, and he was unable to recreate these in exile. Miloš's predicament became a warning to Václav Havel that he should never emigrate.

After the communist takeover, it was impossible for Václav Havel to access higher education. He was able to break into theatre only on the basis of nepotism: he was given a job in the theatre of comedian Jan Werich. The highly popular comedy duo of Voskovec and Werich ran their Liberated Theatre in Prague in the interwar period and were occasionally saved by Havel's uncle Miloš' financial injections when they were threatened by bankruptcy.

Kieran Williams draws a contradictory image of Václav Havel as a personality, which was at the same time fragile and flawed, yet morally extremely firm. Until the time when Havel assumed the office of Czechoslovak President in 1989, he seemed to be quite indecisive whether he should be venturing into politics. He saw himself primarily as an artist and a playwright. However, duty always called in the end. The high moral imperatives he seems to have adhered to for most of his life and his conviction that human beings should not be exploiting the environment and should assume a position of humility towards the natural world seemed to be strangely in conflict with the fact that Havel systematically destroyed his body by heavy smoking and by dependence on drugs and sleeping pills, as well as with his alcoholism and philandering. (All this is mentioned in William's biography, but gently. pp. 91-92.)

As the product of his own independent reading and his interaction with a number of important, but officially unrecognised, cultural figures of Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, Havel made waves with his articles at the beginning of the liberalising 1960s and then became internationally famous for his three absurdist plays which examined human identity and the impact of dehumanising ideological discourse on it.

After the 1968 Soviet invasion Havel became a banned writer and lost his access to the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague, where his three plays from the 1960s were premiered to great success. In the early 1970s, Havel retired to his country house Hrádeček in Eastern Bohemia, where he attempted to write, but his plays, produced in a vacuum, were somewhat lifeless and theoretical, until he produced a series of vivid one-act plays featuring his alter ego, writer Ferdinand Vaněk in interaction with various characters of the post-invasion Czechoslovakia, which were an immediate success both at home and abroad.

The banned cultural liberal activists of the 1960s gathered together in defence of some persecuted underground musicians in the mid-1970s and their activities then culminated with the publication in January 1977 of the human rights manifesto Charter 77, in which they accused the Czechoslovak government of infringing its own human rights provisions. The regime reacted by a hysterical nationwide campaign against its signatories.

Here, Havel's ambivalent attitude to political engagement is clearly to be seen, argues Williams. After Havel became a Charter 77 spokesperson in 1977, he was criticised by his guru, the philosopher Josef Šafařík, for his political activity – in Šafařík's view, Havel should not waste his energies which he needed for art. Havel disagreed. Yet during police detention in the spring of 1977, Havel told his interrogators that he was a writer and that he was quite happy to retire to Hrádeček again and to abandon all political activism. He would have also probably done so had the secret police not broken their agreement and had they not published an edited version of his penitent statement. That of course spurred Havel to more political activity.

In 1979, Havel was arbitrarily and unjustly imprisoned for four and a half years, primarily for his work on behalf of politically persecuted fellow citizens. Although he was released prematurely in 1983, he had almost died and the prison spell took a heavy toll on him. Creatively, the period of imprisonment was fruitful: Havel produced his philosophising

cycle of *Letters to Olga*, which, as well as Havel's political essays, Williams discusses interestingly. Nevertheless, during Havel's time in prison, his wife Olga took a younger lover and Havel himself had a series of mistresses before and after his prison term, which created conflicts in the Havel household. After his release from prison, Havel wrote three plays on Faustian themes. The character of one of them, Dr. Leopold Kopřiva (Nettles) seemed to be a convincing summary of Havel's own loss of identity, trauma and confusion at this time of his life.

One of the later plays by Havel from this period, *Asanace (Redevelopment)*, is, in Williams' view, partially a parody of Jaroslav Dietl's popular TV series *The Man in Town Hall*. Williams argues throughout his book that Havel saw Jaroslav Dietl, the author of numerous highly popular TV series in the 1970s and 1980s, which according to some saved President Husák's post-invasion regime in Czechoslovakia, as his main rival. Williams' argumentation seems quite well documented, although writer Helena Drašnarová, Jaroslav Dietl's daughter, seems rather sceptical about this, as she said to me in a personal conversation in June 2017.

Williams's accounts of Havel's political activities sometimes appear a little too casual. In January 1989, during the demonstrations of the so-called Jan Palach week, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the death of student Jan Palach who had immolated himself in protest against the Russian invasion, Havel was re-arrested. This was because he decided to lay flowers on the spot where Palach had immolated himself. Williams talks about the event quite frivolously, not mentioning the act of commemoration. Havel was apparently arrested when “on 16th January, he ventured out to have a look” (p. 157).

In the last years before the fall of communism, Havel's reputation steadily grew. During the democratic revolution in November 1989, Havel became a negotiator for the newly formed revolutionary Civic Forum. His previous negotiations in Charter 77, when he needed to deal with the egos of various dissident activists served him in good stead, says Williams.

After he was elected President of Czechoslovakia in December 1989, Havel shaped the presidential office using the example of the German president Richard von Weizsäcker, “adopting his conception of the office as a moral command point and a quiet constant, ensuring constitutional stability and continuity” (p.162). Havel certainly tried to do his best, but Williams does not record the grumblings of many Czech citizens who complained that while Havel was giving them his moralising speeches, an array of crooks stole Czech state assets with impunity. Williams does record that Havel's sale of his share of Lucerna to the state enterprise Chemapol, whose boss was his friend, for the inflated price of 200 million Czech crowns raised eyebrows, as did his marriage to the youngish actress Dagmar Veškrnová, shortly after the death of his wife Olga from cancer. Williams also mentions that towards the end of his life, Havel organised in Prague his somewhat megalomaniac Fora 2000, whose purpose was to “solve all the problems of the world”. Havel approved of the US bombing of Serbia in the 1990s (Williams does not say that Havel became infamous for his phrase “humanitarian bombing”) and George W. Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Strangely for a politician who always supported grassroots activities of individual citizens and gave these preference before the actions of political parties, Havel absolutely failed to understand the groundswell of popular opinion which welled up in the Czech Republic from 2007 onwards when 70 per cent of Czech citizens objected to the stationing of elements of George W. Bush's anti-missile base programme in the Czech Republic. But Williams does not mention this, perhaps final controversial aspect of Havel's late political career.

For Havel, politics was applied morality, yet his plays depicted a world without values, concludes Williams. His biography is a clear, concise and persuasive account of the life, work and achievements of a major European personality whose impact, with all its problematic aspects, has helped to shape the twentieth century. It is possibly true that Václav Havel's reputation is now much stronger in the West than in his home country, where apart from Havel worshippers there is a large number of people who look at him quite critically. Having said that, probably most Czechs would admit these days that both the other presidents who came after Havel (Klaus and Zeman) have been much, much worse than him.

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