The International History Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rinh20

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Andrew Mumford & Katherine Bayford

To cite this article: Andrew Mumford & Katherine Bayford (19 Feb 2024): Ghostwriting History: Churchill, Kennedy and the Authenticity of Authorship, The International History Review, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2024.2316738

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2024.2316738

Published online: 19 Feb 2024.

THE INTERNATIONAL HISTORY REVIEW
https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2024.2316738

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Ghostwriting History: Churchill, Kennedy and the Authenticity of Authorship

Andrew Mumford and Katherine Bayford

School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores how ghostwritten works of history compromise the authenticity of authorship as a process and have a tainted historiographical utility as source material in international relations. Using the examples of Winston Churchill and John F. Kennedy we analyse how these famous politicians-cum-historians used research assistants to gather and analyse historical documentation whilst preserving their right to claim authorship of prize-winning works of history. Despite being a long-established practice in the English-speaking literary world, ghostwritten works of history have significant, yet underexplored, implications for shaping historiographical trends. Churchill, for example, was able to place himself at the centre of all events in the Second World War, whilst Kennedy shaped perceptions of how his own vision of leadership should be historically compared. Deepening our awareness of ghostwriting as process tells us something important about the relationship between politicians and the history they try and tell whilst also revealing the impact of 'collaborative history' as a method. The result is a version of events that inevitably places positionality over objectivity, demonstrating the myth-making power of ghostwritten works to impact historiography.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 21 September 2023
Accepted 5 February 2024

KEYWORDS
Ghostwriting; Churchill; Kennedy

For political leaders, inducements to write a book are hard to decline. From the ancient world to the modern, emperors and politicians can shape and manipulate the public's understanding of their tenure, improving their reputation and standing in world history whilst almost guaranteed a bestseller. Even in the contemporary publishing market – in which most first-time authors are lucky to receive an advance – relatively mediocre fare can easily outsell everything else released in the same year.[1]

An appetite for insider accounts, histories, or analyses can, nevertheless, be sated. Whether pressed for time, motivation, or talent, the services of a professional 'ghostwriter' have been used by world leaders and their publishers for centuries. Such a relationship can be both immensely beneficial and quite exploitative. It can also shape our understanding of international relations through the words of someone who simply wasn't there. Napoleon Bonaparte's own memoirs were written and published by one of the most opportunistic loyalists who had volunteered to join the toppled Emperor in his final exile. With little to entertain the miserable Bonaparte on St. Helena, Emmanuel de Las Cases convinced him to detail his life story, grievances, and regrets, dutifully compiling it all in a memoir that would become a publishing sensation.[2] In doing so, Las Cases created a revisionist tome of immense success, recasting Napoleon from tyrannical despot into enlightened liberator, redefining Napoleon's legacy in France and across Europe for

CONTACT Andrew Mumford andrew.mumford@nottingham.ac.uk

generations. His tale is a testimony to the power of ghostwriters to shape the legacy of their 'clients' – but prompts important questions regarding the authenticity of authorship and the manipulation of historical memory in international relations at the hands of a collaborative amanuensis.

What started in the nineteenth century with Napoleon continued into the twentieth century, with figures from Winston Churchill to John F. Kennedy utilising the services of research teams and assistants to undertake research, fact-check, draft, and redraft chapters in their own 'voice'. But where do we draw the line between research and penmanship? If an 'author' has not immersed themselves in the archives or ploughed their way through reams of books, but merely recrafted with a literary flair the research notes of their assistants, then can we really call that authorship? Famous 'authors' write books; anonymous researchers write them. It is an unequal and unfair truism both in the past and the present.

Ghostwriting has been long-established practice in the English-speaking literary world. The term was first coined by the sports agent Christy Walsh who established his own ghostwriting syndicate to write for famous baseball players in the 1920s.[3] Publishers use ghostwriters to create content for authors whose name on the front cover will sell, but who have no time (or inclination) to write the book themselves. For this reason historian Craig Fehrman has described political ghostwriting as 'a byproduct not of laziness but of logistics'.[4]

Yet these logistical machinations have implications for the way in which historiography travels, for how wars are recounted, elections explained, and whether historical figures are revered or reviled in the public consciousness. Whilst some ghostwriters defend their profession, as Hunter Davies has, as 'just another bit of journalism'[5], critics of the practice lambast the 'epidemic of dishonesty' that it generates between author and reader.[6] Back in 1953, a concerned Ernest May railed against ghostwritten books by public figures as a 'conspiracy against history' that had 'built an impenetrable thicket around the truth'.[7] Many ghostwriters sign nondisclosure agreements, throwing a legal mask over their involvement in a book. Some, such as journalist Alex Haley, have to settle for an 'as told to' disclaimer on the inside pages of the book, as he did for the much-vaunted *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.[8] Yet ghostwriters have not always received such benevolent legal cover. The United States Supreme Court, for example, ruled ghostwritten speeches and documents as inadmissible in 1950, describing 'disguised authorship as a deception' and decrying ghostwriting as merely the 'custom of putting up decoy authors to impress the guileless.'[9]

Despite this, the practice has still flourished. In the past few decades it has become apparent that ghostwriters are not always brought in to remould the past – they can be used to shape the future. One of the few things that unites rancorous political enemies Donald Trump and his 2016 presidential rival Hillary Clinton is their reliance on ghostwriters to pen best-selling books that became intrinsic to their political careers. Trump often touted his *Art of the Deal* to indicate how his business philosophy was well primed for application to the political realm (even if the ghostwriter, Tony Schwartz, later confessed to 'a deep sense of remorse' that he had depicted Trump in a way that 'made him more appealing than he was'[10]). Similarly, Clinton's numerous political treatise, published whilst she was First Lady (*It Takes a Village*) and then Secretary of State (*Hard Choices*), were calculated efforts to set her on her own path to the White House. In both cases ghostwriters became the interlocutors of two highly ambitious presidential hopefuls, conveying their core ethos and, importantly, cultivating an image to sell to the American public and wider world.

The accusation of ghostwriting haunts some historical figures but humours others. Two former US presidents embody this dichotomy. On the one hand is Ulysses S. Grant, who turned to writing his memoirs out of two necessities, one financial (a corrupt business partner nearly bankrupt him) and one personal (in 1884 the civil war hero was diagnosed with terminal throat cancer). The huge sales and compelling narrative of *Personal Memoirs* set tongues wagging about the extent to which Grant's publisher, his friend Mark Twain, had to do with writing the text itself.

Although Grant had a team of former staff officers to help him recount details of battles, Twain always insisted he only made small edits to the manuscript and his main goal was to ensure a nest egg for Grant's family out of the royalties.[11] On the other hand is Ronald Reagan, whose post-presidential memoir *An American Life*, was ghostwritten by the journalist Robert Lindsay. Stringing together anecdotes from Reagan's life, Lindsay accurately mimicked 'The Gipper's' stylistic voice to influentially depict him as an astute, compassionate and charismatic leader, countering a growing view of Reagan as a disengaged, incurious and possibly ill commander-in-chief.[12] Appreciative of the positive depiction he had received in his own autobiography, Reagan quipped to his editor after the book's publication: 'I hear it's a terrific book! One of these days I'm going to read it myself.'[13] For Reagan, the ghostwriter-as-memoirist was indistinguishable from ghostwriter-as-PR-advisor.

These examples demonstrate the particular drawbacks and advantages of utilising ghostwritten history for the politicians themselves, but what of the historian? One of the main functions of books penned by politicians (whether memoir or history) is the control of narrative. It is not our purpose in this article to dismiss outright the use of ghostwritten texts by historians – their omission does not get us closer to some unfurnished historical 'truth' – but instead to showcase the role such books play in historical mythmaking. Ghostwriters are essentially mythmakers that are enlisted to furnish a legacy. Such practice has been on-going since Napoleon's time on St. Helena to an extent that a ghostwriter's participation in crafting political memoir is now widely expected and accepted. However, there has been insufficient scholarly attention paid to the historiographical implications of their role. This article highlights the process by which 'collaborative history' between famous authors and their research teams generates narratives, shapes public perception, and sells books. They often make great literature but remain questionable historical texts. Yet their existence as source material for understanding the shaping of historical 'myth' is undeniably important.

In order to understand the way in which ghostwriting has shaped the historical record it is worth exploring two cases in more detail. Winston Churchill and John F. Kennedy bolstered their political credentials with influential books that garnered them a Nobel and a Pulitzer Prize respectively. Kennedy's reliance on his 'intellectual blood bank' Ted Sorenson tells us something important about the relationship between politicians and the history they try and tell[14], whilst Churchill's small army of researchers reveals a particular brand of collaborative history that compromises authenticity and epitomises memoir *as* history by placing himself at the centre of international events.

Winston Churchill and 'collaborative history'

Of all the misquoted Churchill quips, the one that is underpinned with the greatest irony is: 'History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.' As a writer of history (to call him a historian would be a stretch) Churchill relied throughout his career on a legion of assistants to undertake fundamental fact-finding missions and copious copy-editing. The case of Winston Churchill highlights the dilemma of whether writing history without undertaking historical research can still be authoritative history. Of course, the absence of a complete research picture did not diminish Churchill's method of producing written text at fast pace – often during late-night sessions where he would pace his study in Chartwell, armed with ever-replenishing whisky and sodas, dictating a stream of historical consciousness to a secretary, whilst a research assistant sat in a nearby armchair ready to alert him to a relevant document.

Churchill's approach is demonstrative of an inductive approach to history, where he would write the story first and only then select the documents that confirmed his narrative. By his own admission he wrote 'the way they built the Canadian Pacific Railway. First I lay the track down from coast to coast, and after that I put in the stations'.[15] Throughout most of his historical

volumes – which included histories of both world wars as well of that of the 'English speaking peoples' – most of his 'stations' were constructed by numerous assistants. For Churchill, research was a second-order (and outsourced) process. He was obsessed solely with the stylistic elements of writing, rather than the methodological task of combing archives, checking sources, or hunting down corroborating material. For this reason, Churchill's work must be seen as a fundamentally collaborative effort given the historical kudos granted them by the assiduous work of his assistants.

One of Churchill's former assistants, Maurice Ashley, once described Churchill's method of writing history as 'if not unique, unusual in the extreme'. His writing style, Ashley conceded, was 'rhetorical, romantic, exaggerated and, to a meticulous critic, somewhat inaccurate'.[16] The task assigned to Ashley (and many more like him over the decades) was to undertake what Ashley himself distilled as three core duties: 'In the first place they [the assistants] were required to feed him with material', including the provision of relevant documents and books. Secondly, they had to 'make sympathetic and co-operative noises whilst Churchill dictated' – or, more succinctly, asked not to question his interpretation of events. Thirdly, the assistant had to at last 'ferret out facts and get points checked,'[17] to ensure that Churchill's imaginative rhetoric matched historical reality.

It was Churchill's 'wilderness years' in the 1930s – out of office, out of favour, and out of money – that led him to undertake prodigious writing projects as much out of financial necessity as fulfilment of a yearning for literary excellence. In light of this, we have to see Churchill's writing of historical tomes as a direct offshoot of his political career. It was a way of inserting himself back into the national narrative, shaping his own political future by recreating the past.

He achieved this in part by writing his about his illustrious ancestor, John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough. Even from this early stage in his writing career, Churchill was keen to enlist academic collaborators. It was here that Churchill came to recruit Maurice Ashley, an Oxford University history graduate, as his part-time research assistant. Whilst Churchill provided Ashley with some initial hifalutin rhetoric about the duke, it was left to Ashley to undertake detailed historical research, mining the family archives at Blenheim Palace. Ashley's old Oxford history tutor Keith Feiling was given a handsome honorarium to act as a consultant to the manuscript. When the first volume of *Marlborough* was eventually published in 1933 Churchill thanked Ashley effusively in the acknowledgements, which after 4 years of archival work had certainly resulted in Ashley knowing more about the Duke than his own ancestor. The collaborative effort that went into *Marlborough* was certainly a sign of things to come. As Peter Clarke analogises: '[I]t was Ashley who had to locate and choose and quarry and dress the stones from which the master-builder constructed the final edifice'.[18]

Indeed, the signs were already there that Churchill relied significantly on others to help him achieve his literary output. After being hit by a taxi whilst crossing the road in New York City in 1931, Churchill spent months recuperating in the Bahamas. Needing to pay for medical fees, as well as other costly household bills, he increasingly outsourced his literary endeavours. During his convalescence Churchill pocketed a £2,000 fee from the *News of the World* to write six columns from his sickbed, yet passed just £150 of it on to his old private secretary Eddie Marsh – who had actually written them.[19] Marsh's efforts in ghosting columns for Churchill throughout 1932 had born much fruit for the future Prime Minister: Fleet Street editors were keen to have Churchill's name on a by-line even if the content was not his. So determined was *Sunday Dispatch* editor William Blackwood to have Churchill in his newspaper that he wrote to Churchill suggesting that the services of one of his journalists, Adam Marshall Diston, be used 'if you ever descend to having a "ghost"'. Churchill did indeed 'descend', starting a long-running partnership that would see Diston pen numerous articles across a range of outlets throughout the 1930s.[20]

By 1934, the Oxford history don Keith Feiling had become the central researcher on Churchill's much delayed magnum opus, *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*. Spanning millennia, this ambitious account increasingly demanded a larger team of researchers to help Churchill push the

grand narrative along. By the end of the decade Feiling had been replaced by a trio of new assistants: William Deakin (a recent Oxford history graduate), Churchill's former private secretary Eddie Marsh, and Oxford history don G.M. Young. They were to be joined by the postgraduate student Alan Bullock.[21]

Throughout the writing process of *A History of the English Speaking Peoples* Churchill thrust upon his research team the unenviable task of finding credible historical evidence to back up quasi-mythological tales of past English glories that he had imbibed in history lessons whilst at Harrow.[22] Yet the outbreak of war in 1939 put the brakes on this epic project. Churchill was reappointed First Lord of the Admiralty and William Deakin was drafted into military service. This left the much older G.M. Young to keep the project alive during the war years. Indeed, Churchill wrote to Young in the early days of the war offering him 'the fullest freedom of correction and improvement' on the manuscript.[23] In the meantime Allan Bullock, ineligible for military service due to chronic asthma, spent the war researching and writing the chapters on Australia and New Zealand in the nineteenth century.[24]

Before the war was over Churchill managed to add additional intellectual weight to his team. He persuaded Cambridge history professor Denis Brogan to act as a consultant on *A History of the English Speaking Peoples* for a fee of £1,000 (which matched his annual university salary). Brogan read, redrafted, and consulted on the proofs, which had largely laid untouched by Churchill's hand since he had become prime minister in 1940. Frustrated with the lack of detail and accuracy in many passages about American history (an area of particular specialism for Brogan), the new consultant, left to his own devices, simply rewrote many of the passages before discussing them over liquid lunches with Churchill at Chartwell.[25]

Such progress was not to last. Churchill's decision to embark upon his wartime memoirs after the Conservatives election loss of 1945 halted work on *A History of the English Speaking Peoples* once again. Running to around two million words, Churchill's *Second World War* appeared in six volumes between 1948 and 1954. Despite securing Churchill alone the largest royalties and serialisation deal in publishing history up to that point, he still relied on a collaborative research effort from a large and experienced team colloquially known in Chartwell as 'The Syndicate'. Its membership included Lord Ismay, the Military Secretary to the Cabinet during the war, and Sir Henry Pownall, the former Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Their task was made easier by an unprecedented deal struck with the Cabinet Office that saw Churchill secure access to large amounts of his own wartime government and military papers. Many of them were reprinted in the volumes – though the dissenting or angry replies they occasionally prompted from other world leaders or military commanders remained unpublished. This cultivation of a one-sided 'contribution to history' (as Churchill was to describe the project) is a testament to Churchill's desire to write history as a way of shaping long-term public memory of the war – specifically his role in it. As such, *The Second World War* is memoir masquerading as history. Even his old research assistant Maurice Ashley referred to it as 'essentially and avowedly autobiographical'.[26] This is the result of the positionality of the author and the intended political impact of publishing. The team of assistants (co-authors, really) ended up furnishing Churchill's reputation by framing history in a specific way: *his* way.

The deal with the Cabinet Office was approved by the Cabinet Secretary Sir Edward Bridges, who had previously tried and failed to commission a series of official histories of the war whilst the conflict was still on-going. His acquiescence towards Churchill's project was arguably a move to use Churchill as an *unofficial* official historian.[27] Bridges even allowed Churchill's long-time assistant William Deakin to remove any papers from Whitehall that he wished – a deal that was maintained by Bridges successor Norman Brook.

After being fed these documents the Syndicate were able craft a narrative approved by Churchill. Ismay, who was still serving the Cabinet under the new prime minister Clement Attlee, maintained a correspondence with Churchill, providing him with recollections of key events as well as passing on any relevant documents in his own possession. Similarly, Pownall used his

own personal diary and extracts of reports he wrote during the war to write the entire section on the fall of France in 1940 for the second volume.[28] Churchill also recruited retired Commodore Gordon Allen as his lead researcher on naval battles, ensuring that the war at sea got a proper billing. Alongside Allen, Ismay, Pownall and Deakin sat the barrister Denis Kelly who was hired in 1947 originally to catalogue Churchill's completely unorganised private papers but who soon became a trusted proof-reader and fact-checker.[29] The proof-reader Charles Carlyle Wood was added too, although Churchill never fully embraced him into what David Reynold's labelled his 'literary entourage'.[30] It wasn't until research for volume four commenced that Churchill filled an obvious knowledge gap within the Syndicate by recruiting Air Marshal Sir Guy Garrod to write draft chapters about the strategic bombing campaign.[31]

Despite making heavy use of the Syndicate for researching, writing, proof-reading, copy-editing, and fact-checking, Churchill proved remarkably sensitive to public references to his reliance on them. An article in *Time* in May 1948 that referred to Churchill's 'squad of helpers', left him 'incensed'.[32] He wanted the ghosts out of the story entirely. He was able to achieve this to a large extent because the Syndicate, despite its collective skill and knowledge, was not an integrated team. Churchill was not its natural manager given the multiple pressures on his time. Many of the team, including Deakin and Pownall, were part-time. The Syndicate's members remained the sum parts of a fairly incohesive whole.

Perhaps the most important figure to contribute to this work was not a formal member of the Syndicate at all. New Cabinet Secretary Norman Brook became 'the most unlikely ghostwriter', offering fifteen pages of written comments on the proof of volume one that got incorporated into the text and helpfully paraphrasing messages sent between Churchill and Roosevelt to avoid infringement of Congressional secrecy rules so they could be printed in the book. He read the proofs of volume two four times in his role as 'official sensor and unofficial editor' on the project.[33]

Writing volume five of *The Second World War* became a race against time imposed by the looming threat of another general election (the 1950 election saw Labour returned to power with a precarious majority of only five).

The possibility of Churchill returning to Downing Street ensured that the penultimate volume became a testament to the 'collaborative history' approach that Churchill practiced but never preached. As David Reynolds put it, each member of the Syndicate by late 1950 'was now writing drafts as if from Churchill himself (in the first person singular and with Churchillian phrasing) rather than labouring over research memos for "Master" to distil into his own prose'.[34] So concerned were Churchill's publishers about the possibility of him being returned to Downing Street without completing all the volumes that they constructed an elaborate contingency plan that would see former Cabinet Minister, biographer, and diarist Duff Cooper ghostwrite the remaining chapters.[35]

Churchill's eventual victory in the snap election of October 1951 saw the final volume of *The Second World War* compiled after a mammoth effort by the Syndicate. Keen to deflect criticism that his mind wasn't on his prime ministerial duties, Churchill insisted on the volume's preface falsely stating that the original manuscript had been completed before the election.[36] In reality, the Syndicate undertook greater responsibility for its content than any other volume before. Yet its members, loyal to Churchill and his legacy, towed the line that it was still his book. Perhaps with his tongue firmly lodged in his cheek, Denis Kelly wrote a cover note to Churchill on an early draft saying: 'I hope you will enjoy reading what I feel is one of the best books you have written yet'.[37] By the end of this six-volume undertaking, it became increasingly difficult to escape the sense that if Churchill brought the style, it was the Syndicate who brought the substance to the works that bear his name.

It should also be mentioned that after Churchill left office as prime minister for a second time in 1955 a new set of historians were hired to go through the long-neglected proofs of *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*. This team essentially wrote all of volume four themselves under the watchful eye of Alan Hodge, the editor of *History Today* (a magazine founded by Churchill's

long-time confidante Brendan Bracken), who cohered all the chapters. Indeed, so concerned was Hodge that news leak of all the assistance Churchill had received in writing the book he destroyed all copies of the drafts of the manuscript in his possession after publication.[38]

Churchill was not a one-man-band. He was the conductor of a literary orchestra.

John F. Kennedy and his 'intellectual blood bank'

President John F. Kennedy is a figure who holds perpetual fascination for the historian of the twentieth century as being the rare devotee and subject of history. Kennedy – never a groundbreaking historian, but rather a serious and committed writer of popular history – produced a number of notable non-fiction works during his lifetime, some of which became the most significant books on politics within the twentieth century, selling millions of copies and eventually translated into a score of languages. Kennedy's reliance on others when writing during his time as a politician, however, leaves the Kennedy enthusiast with asking two questions: to what extent can Kennedy's works be considered solely his? And how did these works contribute to the Kennedy 'myth' surrounding Camelot?

Historian James Tracy Crown notes that post-Kennedy generations know more of Kennedy's death than the man himself, and so may delve into the 'Kennedy literature' for an insight into the life, times, and thoughts of the president.[39] What effect does the – often unknown, or underappreciated – role of a ghostwriter have in circumstances such as these? Kennedy's own interest in biography seemed geared at gaining an appreciation for great and good men, and why and how they thought and made their decisions.

Kennedy's youth – defined by a heady mixture of privilege and brilliance – brought scores of opportunities to his lap. For a young man interested in both understanding and directing history, nothing could be sweeter. Prior to his political career, Kennedy had – solely – authored manifold articles, alongside one precocious undergraduate-thesis-turned-mainstream-book named *Why England Slept* and one edited memorial volume dedicated to his late brother, relying on help from others but producing the works himself. By the time he had assumed the titles *Senator* and *President,* Kennedy discovered that 'the pressures of time and an easy access to a crew of speech drafters conflicted with, and all but put an end to, his career as a literary writer.' Once a vibrant young writer, JFK found that, as a political operator, he could 'at best,' produce 'a kind of "staffed literature" as a head of a team of writers.'[40] Kennedy's office could produce as many as twelve major articles and speeches each month.[41] None were under the illusion that this was an individual effort.

Kennedy's speeches were particularly egregious examples of collaborative effort, a charge with merit (though without the ability to wound). Whilst some have described Kennedy as 'merely an oral interpreter of manuscripts written by Theodore Sorensen and other assistants,'[42] the president was (usually) involved in the drafting of his speeches and open about his reliance on others. Former vice president Richard Nixon was nevertheless unimpressed by this relationship, complaining in 1962 that 'It's easier for Kennedy to get up and read Sorensen's speeches. But I don't think it's responsible unless he believes it deeply himself.'[43]

When writing a speech, Kennedy would often consult a mixture of friends, colleagues, and staff, most typically relying on a small, intimate group of intellectuals made up of the esteemed historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a sharp young Harvard graduate named Richard Goodwin, the former youngest dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard McGeorge Bundy, and finally a brilliant young lawyer by the name Theodore 'Ted' Sorensen.[44] It was the latter, however, who he would work most closely with. Only Sorensen, others would come to admit, could truly exemplify Kennedy's thought and style.[45]

Kennedy did not ostensibly try to hide his reliance on Sorensen for speechwriting, even from political rivals. When meeting with Richard Nixon following the 1960 election, Kennedy

acknowledged that: 'In the end I found myself relying more and more on Sorensen, who was with me on the campaign tour and who therefore could react to and reflect up-to-the-minute tactical shifts in our basic policy.'[46] When Kennedy once lost his voice during the presidential campaign, Sorensen ostensibly read a Kennedy speech to a room of reporters. 'Actually,' writes Alan Otten, 'reporters learned later the papers were blank. The speech came from a mind so saturated with Kennedy thoughts and approach that it could speak perfect Kennedy.'[47] Kennedy and Sorensen were to become so entwined that one *New York Times* reporter observed that 'When Jack is wounded, Ted bleeds.'[48]

As president, when developing written manuscripts for speeches, Kennedy 'almost always' verbally delivered an outline, fleshed out with guidelines for a completed first draft, such as the major thrust of the argument, some main points it may contain, and an approximate word count and proposed length. Sometimes, specific instructions to find a suitable quote from X or ascertain the number of soldiers at Y battle, or to emulate the pathos or timing of a particular Lincoln speech, or to ask leading academics for suggestions, or to simply study Kennedy's earlier writings and speeches to emulate tone, prevent hypocritical statements, and to build a cohesive body of work.[49] Just as frequently, Kennedy would then critique and revise this completed draft. Less frequently, Kennedy would both conceive, create, and complete a speech himself.[50]

Sorensen, as an established Kennedy 'ghost' or 'voice', was allowed principal direction over the piece of writing, whereas those with less experience were trusted instead with lesser tasks. Arthur Schlesinger, who had worked with Adlai Stevenson in the decade prior, produced drafts that were simply 'too Stevensonian' for Kennedy's taste[51] and therefore was often employed to scour U.S. campuses for fresh intellectual takes. Together, under the direction of Sorensen, the group would collaborate, hone, and redraft the 'first draft' to be delivered to the president. Often, what the president took to be the first collaborative draft was in fact draft number five or six.[52]

Kennedy was often pleased with what had been delivered to him. Even Evelyn Lincoln, a loyal secretary of a dozen years, later wrote that 'many of the most effective and memorable phrases [within Kennedy's speeches] were Ted's contributions.'[53] His mind had come to operate 'as an extension of the President's own,'[54] the two men becoming professionally co-dependent. Their long hours spent honing drafts together even began to annoy Lincoln, who was tasked with typing up pages 'mixed up and renumbered and filled with arrows and incomprehensible lines with little notes in both Kennedy's handwriting and Ted Sorensen's.'[55]

In 1940, the young John F. Kennedy produced a piece of good, amateur academia that would shortly catapult him into celebrity. Kennedy's senior undergraduate thesis had been a labour of love – friends and acquaintances at college taking to mocking the amount of effort exerted on one dissertation. 'We used to tease him about it all the time,' one friend recalled, 'because it was sort of his King Charles head that he was carrying around all the time: his famous thesis. We got so sick of hearing about it that I think he finally shut up.'[56] The effort was worth it, the resulting product entirely his. In the words of Nigel Hamilton, 'Nothing else Jack would write in his life would so speak the man.'[57] Arthur Krock – friend and ghostwriter of Joseph P. Kennedy – deemed the manuscript worthy of being published, introduced Jack to an agent and suggested a name for the proposed book. *Why England Slept* delighted Kennedy, emulating (and seemingly answering) Churchill's own published book of speeches collected under the title *While England Slept*.[58]

Revising his thesis for mass publication, Jack hid away from the world at Krock's home in Washington, D.C. 'I can't say that I did much more than polish it and amend it here and there because it was very, very definitely his own product,' Krock would later state.'[59] There seems to be truth to this claim – few grand differences can be found between the two versions. The book was a success; and the fact that it represented 'a political emancipation from his father'[60] did not prevent that same father from sending copies to every high-society figure he could – including the Queen of England.

Nor was there any doubt as to the authorship of his second published book. Following a wartime injury procured during the sinking of his patrol torpedo boat, Kennedy heard news of

his eldest brother's tragic and ultimately avoidable death in service. Conscious of the late Joe Jr.'s feelings of inadequacy and humiliation, John began to collect and edit a collection of essays and tributes written in tribute to Joe. A small, dignified run of three hundred and sixty copies were made and distributed to family and friends.[61] JFK's close friend, Lem Billings, who had seen the two brothers' adversarial relationship develop over the years, later commented that 'When two brothers are growing up and they are two years apart you aren't aware of a great love between them, but Jack's editing of Joe's memorial book was a real work of love.'[62]

A decade later and now a married politician on bedrest – once again – from a particularly difficult surgery, Senator John F. Kennedy began to envision a significant new book. A series of biographical portraits of American senators exhibiting startling political courage would interest Kennedy, keep madness at bay whilst recovering, and benefit the young senator's career. If *Why England Slept* had marked a point in Kennedy's life in which he had ascended from student to respected figure on the international circuit, then perhaps this would mark a further ascendency. He asked Ted Sorensen to compile some material.[63] In the months prior, Kennedy had struck friends and family as being in a particularly frail physical and psychological state, prompting some to fear that he might give up on his seat in the Senate.[64] 'This project saved his life,' his wife Jackie argued. 'It helped him channel all his energies while distracting him from pain.'[65]

Research for the book was split somewhat evenly, as crates of books were shipped to Kennedy's address in Palm Beach, and his office in Washington. There, Sorensen worked alongside a set of assistants tasked with typing and transcribing. Sorensen himself read and interviewed, producing draft chapters to send to Kennedy, who himself was already ready with handwritten suggestions, feedback, and instructions.[66] Whilst others proposed biographical figures, only Kennedy decided who would make the final cut. Frederik Logevall – himself advocating Kennedy's final authorship – does admit that whilst Kennedy 'was responsible for the book's architecture, themes, and arguments,' it was 'Sorensen took the lead role in drafting the bulk of the chapters.'[67] That is to say: Kennedy was the *big picture guy*. Kennedy's input mostly involved reading and discussing the broad themes and arguments the book should take, and critiquing – as he would with speeches in the White House – the drafts that Sorensen provided him. Tasked with a quick deadline, Sorensen recalled Kennedy sending near-daily instructions relating to 'books to ship down, memoranda to prepare, sources to check, materials to assemble. More than two hundred books, journals, magazines, Congressional Records and old newspaper files were scanned, as well as my father's correspondence with Norris and other sources.'[68]

'Enclosed pleased [sic] find the drafts for two chapters,' Sorensen wrote to Kennedy on Friday 4th February 1955. 'These two chapters are of the approximate length intended: although undoubtedly you will want to introduce a more flowery stroke and greater historical detail (beyond that which I was taught in Lincoln Central High School, the only American history I've ever had). I will say that this is the most gigantic undertaking we have every gigantically-undertaken; and I doubt whether Gibbon could have produced 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' in a proportionately brief time.'[69] *Decline and Fall* it was not; but it nevertheless remained an impressive undertaking – work on the book had begun just under a month prior. Just ten days later, Sorensen wrote another letter attached with two further chapters, alongside 'reference texts for your use in expanding and rewriting those drafts.'[70] The rapidity of the production prompted the senator to become concerned that they were hurriedly producing poor work, and asked if they should instead focus on preparing archive-led original research. No, Sorensen reassured him, convinced that the book's strength instead drew from the excitement of the biographical details, the author's name and reputation, and the pleasure of reading – not from 'whatever new, previously uncovered facts or facets' might be brought to light. It was a book not for the academy, but for the American public. 'Even more important than the telling of these stories is the fact that a United States senator is telling them', he wrote to Kennedy. 'No other Senator or author has done this.'[71] So devoted was Sorensen to Kennedy during this hectic, pressured period, that whilst Sorensen's wife was due to give birth in March, he wrote to Kennedy that her 'intuition

now tells her that this baby will not come early, and therefore if you desired [my presence with you in Palm Beach] during the first week in March, this would be no handicap.'[72]

As James L. Golden notes, here Kennedy 'moved from his typical role of outliner, editor, and collaborator to that of creator. Here he selected his own topic and emphasis, gathered much of his supporting material, then organized and expressed the ideas in handwritten manuscripts.'[73] The reader, however, would not be remiss in wondering how this differed very significantly from his attitude and work towards his speeches on the presidential campaign or beyond. Sorensen himself notes that this creative attitude was rarely 'present with respect to prepared texts'.[74]

Kennedy himself was sceptical as to the value and reliability of most biographies, complaining whilst researching *Profiles* of the paucity of high-quality biographies of American figures. Most biographers, he insisted, gave undue credit to politicians who took paths of which there were no real alternatives – they should instead understand the most difficult of decisions the individuals faced, and analyse their courage within *that* framework. 'Who the hell can tell?' he asked Schlesinger. 'Only the President himself can know what his real pressures and his real alternatives are. If you don't know that, how can you judge performance?'[75]

Profiles did not take long to create: started in January of 1955, the book was published a year later.[76] It is important to note the significant difference between Sorensen's contribution and that of others, most of whom made critical suggestions and feedback following the first drafts, implemented by Kennedy and Sorensen alike.[77] Schlesinger, the most brilliant historian within the Kennedy circle, was particularly critical. By mid-summer, Kennedy told his editor that Sorensen would shortly deliver the finished draft of the book – he was just waiting for some feedback from Columbia's Professor Allan Nevins.[78]

Kennedy was open in his gratitude to those who had helped create the book. His primary thanks are to Sorensen for his 'assistance in the assembly and preparation of the material upon which this book is based.' He also affords thanks to James MacGregor Burns, Arthur Krock, and aides of the Library of Congress. Professor Jules Davids of Georgetown University, Washington D.C., Kennedy states, 'assisted materially in the preparation of several chapters.' Similarly, Professors Allan Nevins, Arthur Holcombe, Walter Johnson, and Arthur Schlesinger are thanked for their editorial feedback. 'This is hardly the preface of someone intending to deceive his readers,' insists Tracy, and to a certain extent, that is true – but a fairer thanks would place much greater emphasis of Sorensen's role.[79] Sorensen seems to be equated to those who simply sent friendly advice or editorial tips. It is certain that Senator Kennedy did not wish to deceive – instead, it appears that it simply never occurred to him that a book primarily written and compiled by another could not be his.

The reception *Profiles in Courage* received simply could not be bought. The *Atlantic Monthly* was particularly struck by its authenticity: 'it is handmade […] written without the assistance of a public relations office.'[80] The senator sent autographed copies of the book to scores of family and friends - though, perhaps because Joe Kennedy was no longer ambassador, not to the Queen of England - and together with Sorensen wrote a flurry of *Profile*-lite articles for America's top magazines.'[81]

The book was a national bestseller. A bit of nudging from Arthur Krock – who sat on the committee for the Pulitzer Prize – meant that the book won, and Kennedy enjoyed a little-needed $500 prize, immediately donated to a college fund for African-Americans. *Profiles in Courage* would, in time, be translated into almost two dozen languages.[82] Boston's City Council mandated that *Profiles in Courage* would become a 'central' part of its history curriculum.[83]

Few critical voices could be heard. The *Christian Science Monitor* noted merely that 'Kennedy must watch his step in the future, for he has set up high standards of political integrity for comparison.'[84] Charles Poore, within *The New York Times*'s Books of the Times section, was troubled that Kennedy had lauded men who had 'showed their most conspicuous courage in defying the very forces that had chosen them for leadership.'[85] Few paid this mild, quiet criticism any notice.

It was only on Pearl Harbor Day, 7th December 1957, that Kennedy's bubble burst. Drew Pearson, a controversial journalist, posited an opinion that no-one else dared suggest: Kennedy was not the true author of *Profiles in Courage*. Kennedy and Evelyn Lincoln rushed to scour his Washington office for notebooks with his handwriting in to show journalists and disprove the slur. 'He talked as he never had done before,' Sorensen recalled of Kennedy's anger. 'This challenges my ability to write the book, my honesty in signing it, and my integrity in accepting the Pulitzer Prize.'[86] Sorensen, making his way to the office, helped to collect samples of Kennedy-penned writing, witnesses who could attest to him working on the book, statements from the publisher. Sorensen seems to contradict himself, complaining that Pearson had alleged that he had 'not merely worked on the assembly and preparation of the materials upon which much of the book was based,' but had written the work.[87] Very well. But it *was* a correct assumption, even if the conclusion (that Sorensen had written the entirety) was wrong.

Much of this is semantics. Much of Sorensen's work comes under the modern title of 'research assistant', which itself can cover a range of sins. Did he *write* the book? No. Did he make a reasonably significant contribution to the book? Yes. Was it ultimately Kennedy's book in spirit, content, and essence? Yes.

'The ABC executives, after privately cross-examining me at length, finally agreed that the Senator was clearly the author of *Profiles* with sole responsibility for its concept and contents, and with such assistance, during his convalescence, as his Preface acknowledged,' Sorensen argued.[88] It is of no doubt whatsoever that Kennedy was solely responsible for its concept. But its *contents?* Less so. Sorensen could, however, appreciate at least one irony. Though he had spent an entire day assuring television executives and their lawyers that Kennedy was the *de jure* and *de facto* author of *Profiles in Courage,* he had ghost-written ABC's retraction for them.[89]

A somewhat uncharitable observer would claim that enlisting servants to undertake or complete manual jobs was not a novelty within the Kennedy family. Joseph Kennedy had paid the *New York Times*' Arthur Krock $5,000 to write a short, fawning book praising his adversary entitled *I'm With Roosevelt,* which argued that his economic policies had saved the country.[90] Ted Kennedy would be punished at Harvard for paying a classmate to take an exam for him. Robert Kennedy had availed himself of the family chauffeur when undertaking his paper round – and later just asked the chauffeur to do it himself. Jack's charm – so easily turned on when in need of something from another – was difficult to refuse. Even sympathetic observers were aware that 'with John […] you never could tell when money or charm or power had attracted talent to 'stand in' for him or indeed to create him as he appeared in his public image.'[91] One thing both separated JFK's profiles from these prior family examples, and also made him a figure more difficult to refuse anything to. John was more charming than Ted, more personable than Robert, and made more sympathetic – thereby inspiring greater devotion – by the fact that he was very ill. Few expected John F. Kennedy to live particularly long.

Defenders of Kennedy's ultimate authorship can sometimes make a weak defence. As one source states, 'The objection was largely baseless. For one thing, Kennedy had a bigger role in the writing, and certainly in the conception and framing of the book, than many of these analysts suggested; the book's broad themes and overarching structure were his.'[92] Nevertheless, he is correct in noting that visitors to his Florida base all speak highly of how absorbed he was in work for the book. 'Without Sorensen or Jules Davids,' Logevall argues, lumping together a man who was tasked with ultimately delivering the book and another who gave some mild editorial feedback, 'Kennedy likely would have produced a similar book, if less felicitous in its prose; without Kennedy, on the other hand, *Profiles* would not have existed.'[93] Such a statement ignores the fact that many good authors employ ghosts for majority drafts and edits on books they could write themselves with more time, as Kennedy almost certainly did here. In a range of sources arguing that Kennedy was *de facto* author of *Profiles in Courage,* most seem to posit the argument that because Kennedy came up with the idea and themes of the work, the work was ultimately his. Indeed. But whilst Kennedy undertook some research and drafting, it was Sorensen

who was tasked with bringing that vision to life. It was not Sorensen's book. But it was not wholly Kennedy's. Most supportive sources seem to simply and fundamentally misunderstand the role of a ghostwriter.

It is important to note that neither Kennedy nor Sorensen – nor anyone around them – considered anything about the writing of the book to be unethical. It was understood that the senator was a busy man and had not personally crafted each and every one of his speeches or articles. Receiving similar help on a book seemed to strike no-one involved as odd. 'It was standard practice,' Oliphant & Wilkie argue, 'for American politicians in the midcentury - and later - to get significant assistance on books that appeared under their name alone.'[94] Logevall begrudgingly admits that Kennedy should 'arguably' have refused the Pulitzer, but adds that 'it's hard to imagine him (or anyone else in his position) actually doing so - such a move would have amounted to a self-declaration of fraudulence and possibly done lasting damage to his reputation… More to the point, in core respects Kennedy *was* the book's author. He himself never wavered from that conviction.'[95]

It is important to clarify why academics generally treat both *Why England Slept* and *Profiles in Courage* as 'Kennedy's own' when the disparity between the production of the two is so significant, and when later books such as *The Strategy of Peace, To Turn the Tide,* and *The Burden and the Glory* are generally treated as 'staff' or 'cooperative literature' 'produced by both a staff and an extraordinarily busy Kennedy.'[96] Does Kennedy's busy schedule as president exempt him from the perceived 'need' to wholly author his own work, in a way that his role in the senate did not? Tracy admits that 'The chief factor which distinguished Kennedy's staff literature from that of other modern Presidents,' was 'his degree of dependence upon one aide […] never before Kennedy had a President so completely merged his thinking and phrasing with one person that in speech-writing they were one.' [97] Indeed, so interwoven was the work of Kennedy and Sorensen, that though Kennedy can be associated with 'staff' or 'collaborative' writing regarding his political speeches and articles, Sorensen was quite truly a 'ghost' – his work largely unknown to the reader, but essential to the book's production.

In writing produced during his political career, Kennedy took the role of a strategy man, concerned with the broad picture, and interested enough in the tactics to believe he had contributed the lion's share. His reading was wide, and his interest sincere. Of all of Kennedy's professional achievements, his books ranked highly for him. He kept leather bound copies of the five he had published on his Oval Office desk.[98] Sorensen recalled that winning the Pulitzer had possibly been the proudest moment of Kennedy's life.[99] Had he lived the fullness of his life to come, Kennedy intended – upon leaving office – to dedicate himself to his presidential memoirs.[100]

Sorensen once described his relationship with Kennedy as 'a bond of intimacy in which there were few secrets and no illusions.'[101] Ted Sorensen's 1965-published *Kennedy* was intentionally and self-consciously offered as a sort of posthumous substitute for the memoir that Kennedy could no longer write. During his time at the White House, Sorensen recalled Kennedy asking him if he managed to note down a particularly relevant comment made by another 'for the book we're going to write.' 'The book *you're* going to write,' Sorensen corrected.[102] It appeared that one illusion remained.

On page 222 of *Profiles in Courage,* John F. Kennedy quotes Abraham Lincoln:

> There are few things wholly evil or wholly good. Almost everything, especially of Government policy, is an inseparable compound of the two, so that our best judgment of the preponderance between them is continually demanded.[103]

Perhaps the same is true of the work itself.

Ghostwriting: the historian's verdict

Preservation of the 'Churchill Myth', guarding the legacy of heroic wartime leader, has led scholars and critics to rally around Churchill over claims of ghostwriting. Peter Clarke argues that all historians rely on research assistance to some degree but concedes that 'the scholarly activity of

"writing history" has rather more to it than exercises in delegation' and that Churchill showed a 'lack of appreciation… [for] the realities of archival research'.[104] Such a benevolent interpretation rests on essentially categorising such political authors as 'writers' rather than 'historians' as it would seem to exonerate them of professional responsibilities for the methodological and empirical basis of their work.

Similarly, David Reynolds concluded that the team effort by the Syndicate in producing *The Second World War* does not diminish Churchill's writing achievements, which were crowned with the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953. In likening Churchill's role to that of a scientist running a university research group, Reynolds argues: 'He did not do all the work personally, but he set its parameters, guided its direction, and sustained its momentum.'[105]

Even Churchill's own research assistants refused to take the limelight away from him. Maurice Ashley stretched credibility in his book *Churchill as Historian* by claiming that 'every word of Churchill's books was his own' and that merely 'his assistants were there to provide him with intellectual sustenance and support and to check the accuracy of the final achievement'.[106] Ashley's steadfast loyalty to Churchill, even after the latter's death in 1965, manifest itself through downplaying the active role assistants such as himself had in the production of Churchill's works. Ashley, who was not involved in the production of *The Second World War*, skims over the way Churchill commissioned others to draft chapters across all six volumes, many of which were then published with little or no alteration. The chapter on the Battle of Britain was drafted by the Oxford historian Albert Goodwin, who had written an influential pamphlet recounting the aerial combat whilst serving in the Air Ministry during the war itself. Similarly, the former Air Intelligence office R.V. Jones, who had become an academic after the war, wrote the material that formed the basis of the chapter on the development of radar. Oxford East Asian specialist Geoffrey Hudson provided analysis for the chapter on Japanese politics and militarisation in volume three, which was printed in the final version almost verbatim.[107]

Similarly, the collaborative literary environment inside Camelot revealed a number of literary biases and assumptions that Kennedy held. Firstly, that works mostly produced by others, when containing his spirit and argument, could justifiably be called Kennedy's; and secondly, it was acceptable for others to contribute significantly when the author was busy or otherwise unable to write.

It is not unreasonable that the 'true' authorship of *Profiles in Courage*'s authorship should be debated – a debate made difficult by Kennedy's untimely and cruel death. Since that November day in Dallas, a group of individuals – many of whom had created Kennedy's literary or rhetorical output – helped create the unimpeachable 'Camelot' figure. Such men helped create and smooth the American public's understanding of Kennedy in both his life and death. This is a testimony to the power of mythmaking that ghostwritten texts possess.

The president had never considered himself – nor attempted to be – a particularly impressive or original historian, but instead a successful popular historian or 'a special kind of modern educator-at-large.'[108] *Profiles in Courage* would be a startlingly successful example of such a work. No serious analyst would believe that Kennedy had not contributed a decent amount to *Profiles,* a work so saturated in Kennedy's interests, biases, and grammatical foibles so as to be reasonably obvious progeny. Nevertheless, it would take a hard heart (or one blinded by loyalty) to think that Sorensen had not completed the bulk, especially in light of the written evidence.

Kennedy had a lifelong fascination and boyish adoration of Winston Churchill, of whom he shared little with but a deep passion for history and somewhat collaborative writing style. Both employed not one individual, with an individual's personality and opinions, but a team of those dedicated to the joint goal of bringing the 'authentic' author to life. The group wished only to communicate *his* views, to present *his* style.

Ghostwritten history reveals a set of methodological and historiographical concerns about their authenticity, content and value. Many of these concerns were flagged by Ernest May in the 1950s, who stridently argued that ghostwriting allows false impressions to pass into the historical

record – 'and if history is made up of many such false impressions, the lessons it teaches to future generations are likely to be misleading.'[109] Not only, May continued, do ghostwriters diminish the utility of historical lesson-learning, they also fundamentally compromise the pursuit of historical 'truth':

> 'History is written from the testimony of firsthand observers… Historical truth cannot depend on second-hand interpretation any more than justice can depend on hearsay. And a ghost-written diary, letter, speech or autobiography is secondhand testimony, the ghost writer's interpretation of why his employer said or thought.'[110]

Utilising Churchill and Kennedy as case studies reflect those dangers for the historian of relying on such second-hand testimonies. This is not to dismiss wholesale their use as historical documents. This article posits that while historians may already take the contents of such books with a pinch of salt, it is important to acknowledge the historiographical role of ghostwritten books due to their capability to shape public perceptions. Such texts are predominantly about myth-making and should be seen in this light rather than fundamentally eschewed because they are antithetical to some unobtainable historical 'truth'.

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Notes on contributors

Andrew Mumford is Professor of War Studies at the University of Nottingham, where he researches the political management of conflict in the modern era. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. andrew.mumford@nottingham.ac.uk

Katherine Bayford is a doctoral researcher at the University of Nottingham. She has had her work published in *The Times, The Spectator, Engelsberg Ideas* and is working on a biography of the Bonaparte dynasty. katherine.bayford@nottingham.ac.uk