

Books of The Times

Scoops and Scuttlebutt of a British Correspondent

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

The Washington Post _____
 The New York Times C22
 The Washington Times _____
 The Wall Street Journal _____
 The Christian Science Monitor _____
 New York Daily News _____
 USA Today _____
 The Chicago Tribune _____

Date 26 Jan 89

Special Relationships

A Foreign Correspondent's
 Memoirs From
 Roosevelt to Reagan

By Henry Brandon

Illustrated. 436 pages. Atheneum. \$24.95.

What impresses the reader most forcefully about Henry Brandon's memoirs is the extraordinary way they knit together the intimate and the public. Mr. Brandon, who was from 1949 until 1983 the chief American correspondent for The Sunday Times of London, describes his book somewhat blandly as "a personal memoir set against the broad-brush canvas of history." But this gives far too little credit to the remarkable nature of the juxtaposition.

Take a small vignette, one of many dozens that make his pages sparkle. He is describing the social life in Washington during the earlier years of his assignment. He remembers the rival salons run by the eminent columnists Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop. Evenings at the Alsops were more combative on the whole, Mr. Brandon recalls, but Mr. Lippmann didn't always intervene when a tough question was posed to one of his guests.

One evening in 1956, "just before the Suez crisis, when Nasser was already causing a great deal of annoyance," someone asked Allen Dulles, then Director of Central Intelligence, whether he had thought of simply "doing away with" the Egyptian leader. Mr. Dulles puffed on his pipe for a while and then said that of course he had considered the idea, "but the trouble is that we have no fanatics on our side and to undertake such an operation, you have to find a man willing to take his life instantly if caught."

Or, on a larger scale, take Mr. Brandon's account of the Cuban missile crisis. For him it begins when, on a working visit to Havana in October 1962, he happened to discover on his own, through what he modestly dismisses as "an extraordinary fluke of

good luck," that Cuba possessed medium-range missiles that were being manned by Russians.

This potential scoop was denied him by the actual onset of what he understandably calls "the most serious crisis of the thermonuclear age between the United States and the Soviet Union." So he has a good reason for describing the crisis itself from the broader perspective of an objective bystander. It is only at its conclusion that he gets personal again: "When on Sunday (October 28) McGeorge Bundy's secretary called me to say that our regular early morning tennis game, which included Bundy, Walt Rostow and John McNaughton — like Paul Nitze, an assistant secretary for international affairs at the Pentagon — would be resumed on Monday, I knew the crisis was virtually over."

By such an irresistible narrative technique, Mr. Brandon not only succeeds in giving us close-up glimpses of the major players who stepped onto the stage of history from the end of World War II up to the present. But he also describes the big events, and pronounces balanced, succinct judgment on them, whether they pertain to the waxing and waning of the Cold War, the passing of the torch of leadership from Britain to the United States, or the extent to which the post-war era really has represented a Pax Americana.

Here's how to write history! one wants to exclaim. How simple it is to make great events bewitching. But then on second thought: it isn't at all simple. For it is not given to many major players on the stage of history to be able to describe themselves with such wit and perspective. And it is not given to many reporters to have known so intimately so many major players.

So what was it about Henry Brandon? Why was it that when he wrote to Edmund Wilson asking for an interview, he received in response the writer's famous printed postcard listing all the literary services Mr. Wilson habitually refused to perform, but he got it tucked inside an envelope accompanied by a note explaining that despite an oath Mr. Wilson had sworn never to grant an interview, he was going to make an exception in this case and would Mr. Brandon please come and see him at his home in Talcottville, N.Y.?

Was it the prestige of The Sunday Times that opened such doors to Mr.

Brandon? Was it his personal reputation? Or was it rampant anglophilia, even though Mr. Brandon happens to be Czechoslovakian by origin? One suspects that it was a little of each, but that something more important was involved — something that is quite evident in the pages of "Special Relationships."

Though he complains about not finding the right questions for Edmund Wilson, and though he quotes a letter to James Thurber in which Mr. Wilson in turn complained that Mr. Brandon "kept asking me questions about books — a kind of thing that bores me, especially when I haven't read the books . . ." it is nevertheless apparent that he usually did ask good questions of his subjects, and that he made good use of the answers they gave. This seems to have engendered trust. One can see it spreading among the people he worked with, inducing them in turn to confide in him and even seek his advice, whether they are editors, ambassadors, secretaries of state or even Presidents and Prime Ministers. One can feel it growing in oneself.

By his title, "Special Relationships," Mr. Brandon means any number of obvious things — from England's longstanding bond with America, so severely tested during the era on which he reports, to the extraordinary friendships he made in his Washington years with such figures as Dean Acheson, John F. Kennedy, Anthony Eden, Henry Kissinger; the list is endless.

But unintentionally his title also refers to the links he forges between his subject and his readers. In a relationship that in other memoirs is too often marred by long-winded valedictory egotism, he avoids all self-congratulation. He charms us and coaxes our confidence, and makes of us his rapt admirers.