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Vaclav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts. by John Keane

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## History

**Václav Havel: a political tragedy in six acts. By John Keane.** London: Bloomsbury. 1999. 532pp. Index. £25.00. ISBN 0 7475 4458 1.

In a ream-length volume John Keane is bashful about suggesting that Václav Havel deserves to be considered a great political figure of the twentieth century. Four terms as president of any country might at least merit a nomination, and justify a good-sized biography. But Havel has also been an internationally celebrated playwright, political dissident and prisoner. His alternative conceptions of power, encapsulated in his famous 1978 essay 'The power of the powerless' were important in their own right, and have also been the subject of some of Keane's own political writings. They kept hope alive during communism and have been seen as prediction and prescription for the demise of communist rule. Havel also became one of the leading figures of the Velvet Revolution, and as president had a profound impact on the post-communist development of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. His influence far exceeds the borders of his homeland.

If the paucity of studies of Havel is an indication, Keane's defensiveness would nevertheless be merited. Havel's primary English-language biography was by *Guardian* reporter Michael Simmons; that is already almost a decade old, and receives no direct reference in Keane's work. Havel's de facto official and authorized biography by his dissident friend Eda Kriseová does receive explicit use, but has been derided as an infantile work elsewhere. This, then, is the current work on Havel.

As Keane's acknowledgements indicate, he enjoyed unusual opportunity in researching the work, with a team assisting with translation and analysis and access to top policy-makers and advisers, as well as to Havel's close friends and family. Lack of reference suggests that Keane did not interview Havel himself for this study.

The work provides a background history of Czechoslovakia, turning on familiar ground in which the young Havel did not feature directly. Havel's own life is certainly depicted frankly, from his bad personal habits to the emotional cruelty he inflicted on his first wife. From early days he is depicted as ambitious and egotistical; in later life even ruthlessly so. Chapter subtitles include 'Machiavelli' and 'The manipulator'. Strikingly, Keane shows Havel's forceful strategizing to elevate his stature during the Velvet Revolution and to make himself thereafter candidate for president, scheming to sideline the much more obvious and likely candidate of Alexander Dubček.

The last chapter of the book, 'Decline', covers 1990–99. Potentially the most interesting chapter, it provides not a thorough chronological account but selective vignettes. Havel's foray into world politics is rightly noted as highly successful, but Keane underacknowledges its full achievement; entirely absent is Havel's part in the downfall of the Klaus government in 1997. Havel still has three years left in his term. True, he has been seriously ill. Keane, however, has Havel dead in the final chapter, writing of the state funeral as if it were history. If Keane's book demonstrates anything, it is Havel's tenacity. He should not be written off yet.