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# Mencken, Reluctant Muckraker

S.L. HARRISON

ONE OF journalism's gaudiest eras was muckraking's incandescent reign. This storied chapter of journalism's yesteryear produced sensational articles—factual reporting that disclosed sordid aspects of American life. Muckrakers exposed the American Dream as illusory and bared harsh truths underlying the myth of an idyllic America. From 1901-16 muckraking's investigative reporters produced bold, brash journalism neither balanced nor unbiased, driven by a crusading moral righteousness to improve society.

Surely, one stimulus prompting the rise of this journalistic vigor was the emergence of literary realism, described by Alfred Kazin as "the insurgency of the Progressive period." Several other related events, however, combined to ignite the incendiary muckraking movement: labor and agrarian unrest; Populism aroused by William Jennings Bryan's "free silver" campaigns; the financial crises of 1903 and 1907; S.S. McClure's willingness to publish controversial subjects, typified by Ida Tarbell's assault on Standard Oil; and new technology that stimulated cheaper mass printing.

By 1917, however, the radical movement had run its course. A number of forces hastened its demise: an advertising boycott by big business; government mail-rate increases for mass-circulation maga-

zines; greater distributors' costs; and a systematic buy-out of offending magazines—new ownership halted publication of articles that might embarrass politicians or business. Finally, the Great War finished muckraking when the press and the public turned its interest to warmaking.

Precursors to the muckrakers included Nellie Bly (Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman) who in 1887 wrote "Ten Days in a Mad-House" for the *New York World* and the 1901 series "Very Plain Talk on Practical Politics" in the *New York Evening Post* by William L. Riordon that exposed the inner workings of Tammany Hall. The literary realists, e.g., Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*; Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*; and Frank Norris, *The Octopus*, are also numbered among early muckrakers. Magazines, however, paved the way for muckraking.

The investigative journalists were led by Ida M. Tarbell, who broke the power of John D. Rockefeller and the Standard Oil Company, and Ray Stannard Baker, who exposed widespread worker exploitation—two of the best muckrakers. Others included Mark Sullivan, who exposed patent medicine frauds; Lincoln Steffens' *The Shame of the Cities* that revealed graft and corruption in cities across the nation; David Graham Phillips, who wrote *The Treason of the Senate*; and William Hard,

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Samuel Hopkins Adams and Thomas Lawson. These were the best of the extraordinary muckraking reporters. Their work appeared in progressive magazines such as the *American*, *McClure's*, *Everybody's*, *Collier's*, *Pearson's* and *Cosmopolitan* among others.

"Muckraker" was the demeaning epithet hurled by president Theodore Roosevelt in 1906 describing "Socialistic" writers who disclosed the dark side of American life. Phillips' exposure of Senate corruption infuriated Roosevelt, who used John Bunyan's allegorical character in *The Pilgrim's Progress* to denigrate the writers' relentless disclosures of social ills. (Erudite Roosevelt might have cited another Bunyan character—Mr. Valiant-for-Truth—but he was in a fury to castigate the "malcontents.") Unrepentant and defiant, the journalists adopted Roosevelt's slur as their proud and defining banner.

But where was H.L. Mencken, one of journalism's giants, during those tumultuous times? Mencken—lauded by Walter Lippmann, Stanley Walker and Joseph Wood Krutch and later by Russell Baker in the *New York Times* as "a monument to American journalism"—remained aloof from muckraking.

Neither liberal nor crusader and cynical by nature, Mencken held little interest in "do-good" causes. He was conspicuously absent from the ranks of the muckrakers. Mencken was twenty-five in 1905, a local Baltimore newspaperman beginning to gain traction in his trade. Diligent perseverance had won him a tenuous foothold with the Baltimore *Morning Herald* as a cub reporter in 1899. Within five years he rose to managing editor of its evening edition. After that paper folded—"sold down

the river" was his bitter interpretation—Mencken joined the Baltimore *Sunpapers* in 1906.

Nonetheless, Mencken's move to the *Sunpapers* was a decided step up professionally. He was aware of the press' shoddy reputation in his hometown. In his early job-seeking days, with no experience, he did not bother applying to the prestigious *Sunpapers* who were unlikely to hire a raw, untutored applicant with only desire and a high school diploma as credentials. Much of the nation's press reflected Baltimore's four other newspapers of that era; most were, as Mencken described them years later, "cheap, trashy, corrupt and vile."

Newspapers had a tawdry reputation. As early as 1807, president Thomas Jefferson wrote: "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle." The War of 1812 produced scurrilous press attacks on "Mr. Madison's war." During the Civil War, a dissident press compelled Abraham Lincoln to close 300 "disloyal" Peace Democrat newspapers—the "copperheads". Confederate leaders similarly muzzled newspapers (and free speech, for that matter). The sensational 'Yellow Press' of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst in the late 19th and early 20th century contributed to newspapers' disreputable reputation.

One muckraker undertook an exhaustive examination of America's Press. Will Irwin, in *Collier's Weekly* (1911), had exposed wide corruption and identified newspapers that had "sold out" to advertisers and government. Irwin's eight-part series was surely read by Mencken, but he left no recorded reaction. His only early

writing on that subject, “Newspaper Morals” (1914), appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Mencken merely discussed techniques well-known to most editors and publishers describing how the press played stories to sustain public interest and gain circulation. His revelations, if startling, were by no means muckraking.

Mencken’s interest outside the office in that era was literary; his free-lance comprised mostly short stories and some poetry. Work, always his main concern, focused on his Baltimore *Evening Sun* column. Mencken took pride in his columns. Later in life, he wrote: “The stuff I wrote for the *Evening Sun* between 1910 and 1935 included some of my best, and yet most of it is buried in their files...In the columns in the *Evening Sun* I can say anything I please. I tackle subjects there that are never mentioned in other newspapers.” None of this work qualifies as muckraking, however. From time to time, Mencken raised issues that offered opportunity for deeper investigation, but he lacked the muckrakers’ righteous fervor to pursue these topics. For example:

- An apt topic for Mencken to tackle was the deplorable state of the Press. Irwin’s examination of America’s newspapers made a promising beginning. Mencken declined to enter that fray, choosing the role of sometime gadfly. He mainly confined his *Evening Sun* observations on the press to several critical book reviews. He contented himself with occasional comment, e.g., his *Atlantic Monthly* piece and essays in the *Smart Set*, the *American Mercury* and from time to time in the *Chicago Tribune*. Many of Mencken’s press criticisms through his fifty-year career are collected in *A Gang of Pecksniffs*

(1975). These essays, if provocative and full of invective, are not muckraking. Mencken’s commentaries lacked specifics and provided no prescription for improvements, essential ingredients for a muckraking effort seeking to bring about social change.

- Given his predisposition to hypochondria and all things medical, Mencken might be expected to have sounded alarms regarding Baltimore’s poor sanitation. A cholera scare alarmed the city in 1910; a long-standing nationwide scourge, cholera had killed former president James K. Polk in 1849. Mencken’s only response was a column to soothe Baltimore’s alarmed populace.

- A quarter-century later, he was reluctant to pursue a similar medical scare—syphilis. Medical statistics disclosed that this malady was the highest reported of any disease in the City of Baltimore, exceeding childhood measles and chicken-pox. Mencken’s main inquiry appears to have been concerned with the death rate from syphilis (third-highest in Baltimore). The topic was not explored further and provided fodder for only a single column. Here was a meaty story, a perfect muckraking topic, but Mencken (and the *Sunpapers*, for that matter) brushed aside this critical health issue.

- Mencken also sidestepped a major issue with his dismissal of a 1913 vice report, “The Traffic in Babies”. He focused on deriding the morality of the clergy and scoffing at theological behavior disclosed. Here, Mencken abandoned his journalistic instincts. The practice was clearly one that city fathers, and Mencken, preferred to sweep under the rug, a topic no one wished to explore.



Hearst's New York American (15 April 1906) was unsympathetic to President Roosevelt's fears that exposure to "too much corruption" would "impair the public's eyesight." Hearst's Cosmopolitan magazine published "The Treason of the Senate," and those articles aroused TR to a fury and to call a halt to these "Socialistic" writings.

Health care, specifically hospitals, would appear to present an opportune target for any red-blooded journalist, especially Mencken. In his rare expeditions into this field, Mencken was absent concern for the poor, unserved public, ideal stuff for a muckraker. When he addressed the need for additional funding for the Hospital for the Women of Maryland, Mencken could have been acting as its public relations fund-raiser. It was a good cause to be sure, but Mencken passed over the lack of care available for the needy.

Later, addressing the state of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, Mencken was similarly lyrical with praise. Mencken admired the Johns Hopkins, then as now an adornment to Baltimore, where he repaired to ministrations on many occasions. (He willed a large legacy to that institution.) But newsman Mencken raised no word of criticism, despite the problems of medical care for Baltimore's indigent.

- In truth, Mencken's stance was more often than not that of a smug, self-satisfied burgher. When Mencken addressed issues



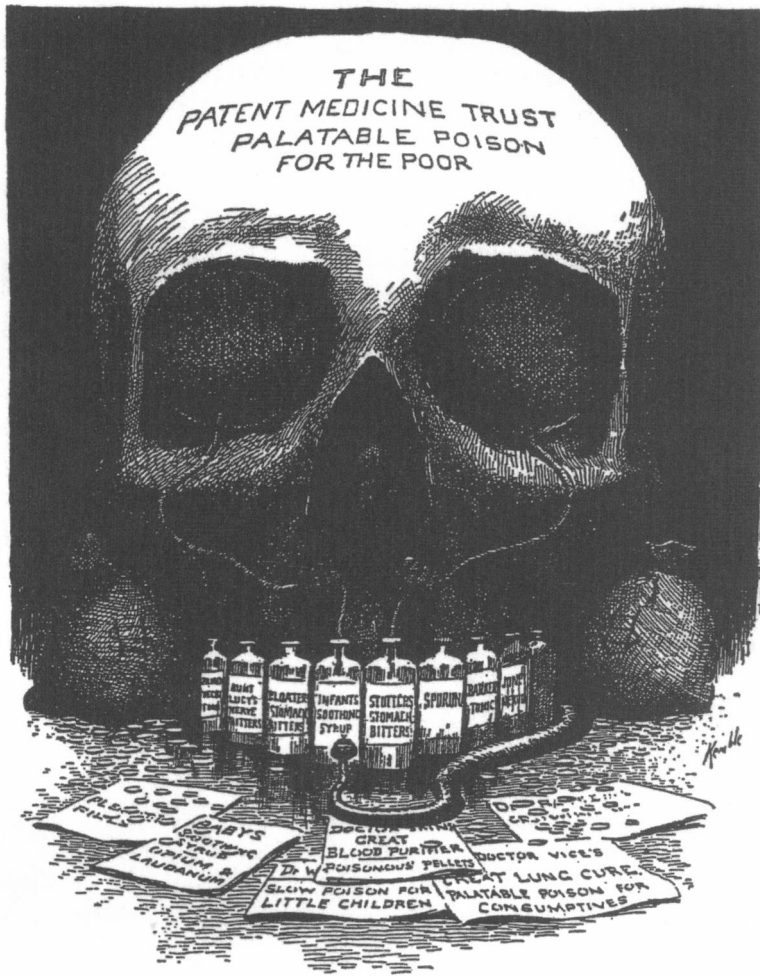
of civic or social significance, he was a virtual cheerleader, a Baltimore Babbitt. For example, his enthusiasm for the need for a first-rate municipal art gallery was a screed for more funds from philanthropists, with little comment for the indifference to fine art evidenced by a major American city. Similarly, his enthusiasm for the merits of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, like his plumping for the Johns Hopkins, was unalloyed civic pride. To be sure, he raised issues that begged for deeper investigation and analyses—e.g., the police and public schools—that could have led to genuine investigative pieces, but Mencken was content to scoff at lax police work and expose questionable educational practices and left to others the burden of further exploration and correction.

- One criticism leveled against the muckrakers was their avoidance of addressing many social ills that affected blacks, specifically, lynchings. Mencken dealt with lynching, especially his coverage of the 1931 Eastern Shore episode—news commentary that resulted in attacks against the *Sunpapers*; but he was no crusader. His observations were more in a spirit of cynical analysis. Of course, Mencken viewed lynching as reprehensible, but specific legislation seemed futile. If lynching was defined as a capital offense, enactment must be by legislative action, not by judicial decision. In 1933 Mencken addressed proposed passage of anti-lynching legislation in Maryland. (Senator Robert E. Wagner, D-NY, proposed federal anti-lynching legislation in 1934 and 1938; none ever passed under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.) Like his nemesis, FDR, Mencken ducked anti-lynching legislation.

Mencken thought such action futile in Maryland. In the *Evening Sun*, he wrote that “lynching centered down in the Bible swamps of the lower [Eastern] Shore” but was tacitly endorsed by the “better people” of the Free State. He named leading state educators “who support the Trans-Choptankian Kultur”—the presidents of Johns Hopkins University, the State Normal School at Salisbury, and the supervisor of high schools of the State Board of Education—all of whom had written against the bill earlier in the *Sunpapers*. More educational guidance, observed Mencken, was hardly to be expected from grade-school teachers when the state's top educators opposed tough legislation.

The real problem, as Mencken saw it, lay with the composition of the state legislature. No remedy would come from that quarter so long as rural counties continued to be over-represented in Maryland's Senate and House of Delegates. In any event, Mencken concluded that lynch mobs are “usually made up of riffraff” and “its leaders, quite as likely as not, are local politicians,” and “it is idle to talk of anti-lynch laws at this time.” Mencken chose to focus his scornful attacks on the backwardness of the denizens of Maryland's Eastern Shore and the dominance of rural counties in the General Assembly. Implicit in Mencken's argument is the idea that a greater metropolitan representation would somehow solve the problem. This was, at best, a dubious assumption given Mencken's widely-known view of a gullible electorate's lack of intelligence.

- No crusader, but a libertarian and constant advocate for personal civil rights, Mencken might be expected to have taken up arms for the right of female suffrage. In



*Samuel Hopkins Adams' "The Great American Fraud" appeared in Collier's Weekly (7 October 1905). E.W. Kemble's full-page cartoon, "Death's Laboratory" (3 June 1905) also attacked patent medicines and Collier's editor, Norman Hapgood, banned this type of advertising from the muckraking magazine. (E.W. Kemble is remembered as the artist who provided the 174 illustrations for the 1885 first edition of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain.)*

1879 the 15th Amendment to the Constitution granted all men the vote regardless of “race, color or previous condition of servitude,” leaving women legally inferior. Suffragists had sought this right for women since the early days of the republic. Denial of this fundamental right kept women subservient. Mencken, from that generation of men who addressed women condescendingly as “little lady” or “my dear,” did little to advance their cause.

Mencken, writing in *Maryland Suffrage News* (1913) at his patronizing best, warned distaff readers that “once the vote is in the hands of every adult citizen, the time will be upon us for revising radically our definition of ‘citizen.’” Women finally obtained universal suffrage in 1920 with passage of the 19th Amendment. Mencken’s attitude during the struggle of those long years was reflected in *In Defense of Women* (1922), where Chapter IV (essays 31-41) of that text is devoted to “Woman Suffrage.” The book is a classic of Mencken satire, clearly offensive to any discerning feminist. Some readers take literally the book’s title.

These innocents, bereft a sense of humor, are blithely oblivious to Mencken’s sardonic mischievousness. In *Defense*, Mencken was Mencken at his most uproarious subtlety. His sometime-elephantine humor outweighs whatever serious themes might be evident. Indeed, Mencken’s skepticism influenced his rigid reluctance to take seriously the muckraker’s efforts to improve society. To the end of his life, Mencken contemptuously dismissed these earnest essayists as fanciful “goo-goo’s” [for good government] and “uplifters.”

● One area where Mencken might arguably qualify as a muckraker is his life-

long defense of freedom of expression—a Constitutional right guaranteed by the First Amendment. To his dying day, Mencken believed free speech and press was largely a myth in America. Mencken’s writing in every forum to which he had access testifies to that principle; a column in the *Evening Sun* lends substance to that claim.

In “Oh, Long May It Wave” (26 January 1925), Mencken defended Benjamin Glassberg, a Jewish school teacher in Brooklyn, N.Y., who was accused of making remarks in class sympathetic to “Bolsheviks.” His accusers, reported Mencken, were all “Christian students” outraged at Glassberg’s “unpatriotic” sentiments, who were “coached by the School Board to so testify.” The majority of students defending their teacher were Jews. The anti-Semitism demonstrated by the Brooklyn authorities was palpable and Mencken said so.

Mencken denounced the Board of Education, the Kiwanis, the Rotary and the American Legion (all of whom conspired to fire Glassberg, who merely stated factual truths) for their “Red hunting” frenzy. Mencken regularly roasted Rotary and the American Legion as hypocritical flag-wavers. Throughout his career Mencken ardently defended the Bill of Rights, especially the First Amendment. Supposedly privately anti-Semitic, Mencken fought publicly against intolerance and the record shows that he rigorously attacked any persecution of minorities.

Indeed, in his last published newspaper commentary (1948) Mencken decried forced segregation of whites and blacks on Baltimore’s public tennis courts and urged that such “relics of Ku Klux be wiped out in Maryland.” While defending citi-



zens' rights to mingle in municipal parks regardless of race and condemning Maryland's vestiges of the Klan and Jim Crow, the irascible Mencken could not resist observing that the "witless gyrations" of golf or tennis were "absurd." If demented "idiots" wished to indulge in such errant nonsense, segregation was equally absurd.

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DURING muckraking's heyday Mencken was busy making his literary reputation. He served his newspaper apprenticeship, broke into the free-lance market, helped launch the *Evening Sun* and wrote several books to establish his credentials. As a journalist, his "Free Lance" column had come and gone (1911-15), curtailed by his newspaper for pro-German views. In his early years, Mencken's diligent after-hours work was confined to *Leslie's Weekly*, *Bookman*, the *Atlantic* and other popular magazines. Mencken, forever contemptuous of "up-lifters," was a journalistic trouble-maker, but muckraking reform held no attraction for him.

Mencken managed to "stir up the animals" as a columnist with little constraint imposed—generally, the clergy were off-limits. But when men in the pulpit preached prohibition or politics, they were fair game for Mencken's scorn. His brief stint as a war correspondent met mixed reaction; his dispatches, termed "letters" by timid editors, were never printed when these craven gatekeepers decided they held a pro-German bias. Mencken spent his *Sunpapers* exile years writing for the pro-German *New York Evening Mail* before it was shut down by the Wilson Administration. He became co-editor of the *Smart Set* and spent the war years writing *The*

*American Language*. In 1920 Mencken resumed his career at the *Sunpapers* with his "Monday Articles." By then, muckraking's era had waned and the people who once exposed the dark side of society and grim aspects of the human condition had gone on to other areas.

Mencken, no idealistic reformer, preferred to recall fondly an idyllic, near-mythical halcyon past. Large numbers of his "Monday Articles" were devoted to home-town Baltimore. Despite his reputation as an iconoclast, Mencken was an idealist when it came to his home turf. Indeed, many of his *Evening Sun* essays are blatantly sentimental valentines to a by-gone Baltimore, often filled with nostalgic, even wistful reminiscences. Mencken could wax lyrical over Baltimore's hellish summer weather, comparing with smug superiority how much worse it was than New York City. He reworked many of these *Evening Sun* columns into delightful essays for the *New Yorker* and *Esquire*, then collected them into the charming *Days* books. This trilogy resurrected the near-forgotten feisty curmudgeon into a benign Mencken whose nostalgic reminiscences enchanted a new generation of readers.

Occasionally, Mencken mentioned some less-savory aspects of Baltimore life, but lacked the temperament to pursue these issues. Mencken was no muckraker; his compass too narrow, his newspaper forum too restrictive. The parochial Baltimore *Evening Sun* limited topics to a local audience. More important, Mencken lacked the reformer's zealous passion for improvement and change, traits that he contemptuously linked to intrusive Puritanism. Mencken was an annoying gadfly, content to inform his readers of society's afflictions.

tions and leave reform to others.

The closest Mencken came to muckraking might be found in his long crusade against the pervasive Puritan influence on American thought through his books such as *Notes on Democracy* (1926) and *Treatise on the Gods* (1930). But these weighty explorations into politics and religion failed to stir public ire or imagination or arouse much interest. Through his life Mencken publicly scoffed at various religious zealots, e.g., “imbecile” Christian Scientists, “palpably Roman” Presbyterians, “cow-pond” Baptists and “anti-social” Methodists. Despite Mencken’s derision, Sinclair Lewis’ assault on evan-

gelists, *Elmer Gantry*, was more palatable to popular taste. No one, however, argued more forcefully than Mencken against gullible human religious folly.

Regardless of his public persona as a curmudgeon, Mencken was possibly a crypto-idealist, like Jonathan Swift. Unlike Swift, however, Mencken was neither angry nor disillusioned; he expected little intelligence from “the vermin that infest the planet” and was rarely disappointed. If a reluctant muckraker, Mencken’s chosen role was to raise disconcerting truths and, like the gadfly he was, move on to raise yet another annoying welt on the hide of the body politic.

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