

The Irrepressible Mencken

The bad boy of Baltimore has lost none of his punch—or relevance.

By Daniel McCarthy

FOR A MAN dead 50 years this month, H.L. Mencken remains remarkably prolific. No fewer than three volumes of wholly original Mencken material have seen print since 1989—first *The Diary of H.L. Mencken*, published against his explicit instructions, and more recently the memoirs *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work* and *My Life as Author and Editor*. With this trove of fresh Menckiana have come, inevitably, new biographies, beginning in 1994 with Fred Hobson's *Mencken: A Life*. Terry Teachout followed eight years later with *The Skeptic*. And last November brought a third, touted as the most comprehensive yet, Marion Elizabeth Rodgers's *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*. Between these books and their contrails, Mencken has not been this much a public figure since the stroke that ended his career in 1948.

And what a career it was. Starting in 1899 at the tender age of 19, Mencken was a newspaperman for nearly five decades, working—usually for one or another of the *Baltimore Sunpapers*—as reporter, drama critic, city editor, columnist, Sunday editor, and editor in chief. At the same time, he led a parallel life in magazines, first as book editor of *The Smart Set* and soon, with George Jean Nathan, as its co-editor from 1914 to 1923. For a decade thereafter he helmed *The American Mercury*, a political and cultural monthly he founded with Nathan and publisher Alfred Knopf. Along the way, he and Nathan had launched three lucrative pulp magazines simply as cash cows.

All that, and Mencken still found time to write a half-dozen original books, including the first American works on Shaw and Nietzsche, and to revise and edit collections of his own journalism and essays amounting to about a score more. His tremendous output, as much as his vituperative talent and fortitude in assailing any eminento he thought a fraud or poltroon, led Walter Lippmann to acknowledge him in 1926 as “the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people.” The *New York Times* went one better, calling him “the most powerful man in America.”

But his reputation flagged in the 1930s, as the old broadsides against Rotarians and Baptists failed to amuse in the depths of the Depression. The *Mercury's* circulation slumped, owing to Mencken's diminished appeal and the magazine's suddenly steep cover price of 50 cents. Sniping critics took to calling its editor “the late Mr. Mencken,” while former friends like Nathan and Theodore Dreiser, launching their own magazine, took cheap shots at him.

Worse was to come. With the approach of World War II, Mencken recalled the Hun-bashing of the last great war. He felt no love for the English and no hatred of the Germans—quite the opposite—and above all he valued his freedom to speak his mind. Rather than submit to censorship, he resigned from the *Sunpapers*, retiring from journalism to write his memoirs, including the two that would be published posthumously and three volumes of youthful reminiscences—

Happy Days, *Newspaper Days*, and *Heathen Days*—that would prove his most popular works yet.

Their success came at price. In the '20s, Mencken had seemed radical; in the '30s, hidebound. In the decades that followed, he was something else again—quaint. By 1955, the year before his death, friend and fellow journalist Alistair Cooke could suggest that Mencken was no serious writer at all but rather “a humorist. He helped along this misconception by constantly reminding people that he was a critic of ideas, which was true only as the ideas were made flesh. He was, in fact, a humorist by instinct and a superb craftsman by temperament.” That verdict stood for a quarter of a century, even after Charles Fecher's seminal re-evaluation of his political and literary ideas in *Mencken: A Study of His Thought*.

But beginning in 1981, when Mencken's diary was released from the time-lock he had placed it under for 25 years after his death, all of that changed. By then, the sort of language he used in describing Jews and racial minorities was no laughing matter. Moreover, the diary and the memoirs released from 35-year time-locks in 1991 could not be dismissed as japes; here were Mencken's considered reflections for posterity on his life and times. Humorist gave way to controversialist once more, and the critics who bristled at his racial and political heterodoxies soon exhumed Mencken's other works to pronounce them duds, too. If friends like Cooke had unwittingly damned him with faint praise, his enemies now paid the compli-

ment of taking him seriously—even if only to excoriate him.

The detractors insist that Mencken was wrong, spectacularly so, about every major issue to confront the United States since Prohibition: the Depression, which he refused to acknowledge in print until 1931; Hitler's aggression and the plight of Europe's Jews, concerning which he was conspicuously silent; and even, in the realm of pure literature, the merits of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Joyce. Behind the particulars looms a broader indictment: that Mencken was a complacent and incurious bourgeois, blindly faithful to 19th-century notions of *laissez faire* and social Darwinism. Even his agnosticism was conservative in the worst sense, a patrimony from his cigar-merchant father.

Mencken's defenders have an easy time refuting these charges—or at least mitigating them. However uncharitable his words, Mencken's actions toward Jews and blacks were never less than fair and frequently far more: he published black writers in *The American Mercury* when few other respectable journals would do so; he mocked the Ku

As for intellectual laziness, it is a curious complaint to level against a man whose professional works, to say nothing of his private interests, included books devoted to philosophy, linguistics, political theory, comparative religion, ethics, literary criticism, journalism, and even, in collaboration with a pediatrician, child care. If he dissented from what has come to be the academically correct opinion of Hemingway and Faulkner, he was far ahead of the academicians in recognizing the genius of Mark Twain and the sterility of the genteel tradition. It is true, though, that Mencken's views evolved little over the course of his life. His beliefs had ossified by age 25, as he readily admitted.

That the controversy over his reputation continues to burn despite both sides having said about all there is to say would not have surprised Mencken. But he might have been amused to see who is in his corner. Unusually, this literary quarrel cuts across ideological lines, with Mencken's defenders including such strange bedfellows as Joseph Epstein and Gore Vidal, George Weigel and Jack Shafer. His critics run the narrower

most conservative of Mencken's Boswells, plainly disapproves of his subject, who emerges from *The Skeptic* a sub-Nietzschean jerk.

Which brings us to Marion Elizabeth Rodgers and *Mencken: The American Iconoclast*. Hype notwithstanding, her book is no more comprehensive than Hobson's, though it draws upon more sources. But where Rodgers—a lay scholar of Mencken since the day she tripped over a bundle of his love letters in the Goucher College library—shines is in giving us the most recognizably human Mencken to date. Her book can even be judged by its cover, a shot of Mencken the *bon vivant* downing Baltimore's first glass of post-Prohibition beer. The contrast with the dour photo adorning the jackets of the Hobson and Teachout books is revealing.

Rodgers provides the best, as well as the liveliest, up-to-date biography of Mencken—though it would be better still without the abundant typographical errors: *caveat lector*. Where the bad boy of Baltimore is concerned, biographers can be forgiven for emphasizing the negative; Mencken himself believed “the iconoclast proves enough when he proves by his blasphemy that this or that idol is defectively convincing”—no need to raise another to take its place. Rodgers, however, shows that Mencken stood for something after all. Certainly he loved German culture and held firm to an old-fashioned code of honor. But what unified and animated his journalism and criticism alike was his radical devotion to liberty. As he put it in 1922, “My literary theory, like my politics, is based chiefly on one main idea, to wit, the idea of freedom. I am, in brief, a libertarian of the most extreme variety, and know of no human right that is one tenth as valuable as the simple right to utter what seems (at the moment) to be the truth. Take away this right and none other is worth a hoot...”

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Klux Klan and denounced segregation at every turn; and while he refused to be browbeaten into drumming up war with Germany, he aided Jews trying to escape the *Reich* in every way he could, signing affidavits to help refugees emigrate to the United States. When he did write about Jewish persecution, he went further than most journalists of the time—and considerably further than the Roosevelt administration—in asking why the U.S. shouldn't “take in a couple of hundred thousand” German Jews, “or even all of them?”

gamut from Hilton Kramer to Garry Wills. Both camps have representatives among the latest crop of biographers, though not necessarily the ones you might expect. Fred Hobson describes himself as many of the things Mencken most despised—“a southerner, a professor of literature, a political liberal, and an admirer of Franklin D. Roosevelt”—yet *Mencken: A Life* is supremely objective, even to a fault. Hobson finds Mencken a product of his times and wastes little energy condemning him for it. Terry Teachout, on the other hand, nominally the

His political and literary thought cannot—or at any rate should not—be divided. Today, whether as a source of amusement, controversy, or insight, the political writings overshadow his earlier work as a critic. But it was in that capacity that he first made his mark beyond the newsrooms of Baltimore. In his monthly reviews for *The Smart Set* and his 1917 *Book of Prefaces*, Mencken waged a one-man culture war against the regnant school of thought that held the purpose of literature to be moral edification. For Mencken, always skeptical of higher values, the purpose of literature was simply to show life as it is, in all its amorality. He championed writers who seemed to share this belief, most notably Theodore Dreiser, who by the standards of the day was considered risqué—indeed, his books were subject to being banned from the mails and suppressed by the New York Society for the Prevention of Vice. Such measures forced Mencken to carry his campaign beyond the review pages and into the courts. On both fronts, he won.

His most famous victory came in the “Hatrack” case of 1926, with which Rodgers opens her biography. The incident, which put Mencken himself in the dock, concerned a nonfiction story by Herbert Asbury—since more famous for writing *The Gangs of New York*—that ran in the April issue of *The American Mercury*. Asbury related the tale of a small-town prostitute shunned by the local churches who took her clients to graveyards for their trysts—Protestants to the Catholic cemetery and Catholics to the Masonic one, so as not to cause scandal. The story was cheap and vulgar, and Mencken, as editor of the *Mercury*, thought little of it. But, hard up for copy, he published it anyway.

Once he did, the New England Watch and Ward Society—whose leader, Rev. Franklin Chase, had long been a butt of Mencken’s derision—pounced, warning

No actual al-Qaeda terrorists have been identified and caught, but some American journalists might have been among the targets of the post-9/11 presidential order

to the National Security Agency (NSA) to tap terrorist communications secretly without judicial oversight. Given the imminence of the threat, the White House’s panicked response was understandable, but anyone who has worked in the intelligence community knows that teltap operations start with collecting and analyzing large volumes of raw data. Very few al-Qaeda members were known, much less their cellphone numbers, which meant that the investigation was of necessity wide in scope, seeking to establish linkages through identified individuals regarded by the U.S. government as extremists. NSA has admitted that the investigation was not limited to known al-Qaeda operatives and, according to one source, was a fishing expedition that sought to look at many individuals quickly. As is often the case where hard intelligence is lacking, many of the targets were little more than vaguely defined persons of interest who seldom had actual connections to terrorist groups. Some were contacts or sources for journalists in the United States who were working on terrorism stories and who were in turn linked to the ostensible targeting of al-Qaeda when their numbers came up on telephone logs. The presence of a number of American journalists in the investigative pool was undoubtedly a major reason the government chose not to apply to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court for authorization for the teltaps in the first place, as it would have raised both First and Fourth Amendment issues.



America’s Persian Gulf emirate allies have been watching the Iraqi elections warily and have begun making contingency plans against a much greater threat than that posed by deposed dictator Saddam Hussein.

Baghdad has been the traditional enemy of countries like Kuwait, but there are concerns that a break-up of Iraq will lead to worse evils, most notably the creation of a Shi’ite rump state that will effectively be controlled by the Iranians. According to defense sources in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, contingency planning is now focused on the threat from a united Iran and Shi’ite Iraq. Saudi Arabia is also engaged in similar planning. There is also a growing perception that Tehran poses an additional threat through its program to develop nuclear resources, particularly as Israel has made clear its intention to strike against the Iranian nuclear reactor at Bushehr. If that were to take place, Iran almost certainly would retaliate by carrying out its stated intention to attack Israel and use intermediate-range missiles and its air force to strike all targets in the region that are linked to the U.S., which would include bases in Iraq, Camp Doha in Kuwait, Central Command in Qatar, and the Navy base in Bahrain, drawing the United States into the conflict. It would also undoubtedly unleash a wave of terrorism throughout the region and against the U.S. There are also civil-defense concerns. A bombed reactor could result in a Chernobyl-type meltdown that would produce contamination disastrous to the entire Gulf region.

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