



The Riddle of Ross

By Granville Hicks

JAMES THURBER first met Harold Ross in 1927, when *The New Yorker* was two years old, and they were closely associated until Ross's death in 1951. In "The Years with Ross" (Atlantic-Little, Brown, \$5) Thurber has tried to give neither a biography of Ross nor a history of his magazine. What he has primarily done is to tell a lot of stories, many of them very good stories, about his experiences with Ross and the experiences of others. These are grouped in a general way by topic—Ross and writers, Ross and artists, Ross and managing editors, and so on.

Thurber says that when he used to be asked, "What manner of man is this Harold Ross?" he could only reply, "What Harold Ross do you mean? There are so many of him. On the other side of every Ross is still another Ross. I keep finding new ones myself." It is not surprising, therefore, that his book is full of contradictions. "If you get Ross down on paper," Wolcott Gibbs told Thurber, "nobody will believe it." For myself, I find Thurber's Ross hard to believe in; whether that proves that Thurber has got his man is another question.

The reader is confronted with a series of paradoxes. In the first place, we are led to conclude that the founder of a magazine that was intended to be, and has generally been accepted as, the epitome of urban sophistication was incurably provincial. Thurber says that he often thinks of Ross as "an 'aw shucks' farm boy from Colorado trying to land a 1900 biplane in the middle of Fifth Avenue," and he reports that "his heavy ingenuous Colorado hand was often laid violently upon anything that struck him as 'intellectual.'" That Ross had a prudish streak has often been said, and Thurber devotes a chapter to anecdotes illustrative of this trait.

Furthermore, it appears that Ross was by no means a cultivated man. "His mind is uncluttered by culture," someone once said to Thurber. He knew nothing about painting or music, according to Thurber, and not much more about literature. "He talked, fitfully and at long intervals," Thurber remembers, "about Twain's 'Life on the Mississippi,' the short stories of O. Henry, especially 'The Ransom of Red Chief,' Jack London,

certain war books, H. G. Wells—not the novels—the memoirs of doctors and surgeons, *True Detective* magazine, a book about the migration of eels, whose way of life never lost its fascination for him, and Kipling—not the poems." One day, the story goes, he asked the checking department, "Is Moby Dick the whale or the man?" On the occasion of their meeting he said to Thurber, as he was to say again and again, "Writers are a dime a dozen."

He was not sophisticated and he was not cultivated, and his success apparently cannot be attributed either to qualities of leadership or to administrative ability. As far as possible he avoided contact with his subordinates, and such contacts as he had were likely to be productive of bad feeling. He was a great believer in systems, but his systems, as Thurber describes them, were preposterous. In conducting his own affairs he was so far from systematic that his secretary was able to swindle him out of \$71,000 in six or seven years.

The Ross portrayed in these pages was by no means an easy man to work with. After describing him as a kind of crusader, Thurber writes: "Many of us who went with him on his Quest, part of or all the way, often became bored or infuriated,

and wanted to quit, and there were scores who did quit and found an easier way to live and make a living." In the chapters called "Miracle Men" and "More Miracle Men" he tells of some of those who came and went: Ralph Ingersoll, Joseph Moncure March, Arthur Samuels, James M. Cain, Bernard Bergman, Stanley Walker, and others. "My experience on *The New Yorker*," Walker told Thurber, "was, I suppose, something like trying to swim in a vat of blackstrap molasses while handcuffed."

"A few of us could not quit," Thurber says. Yet he leaves no doubt that he experienced his share of exasperation. Ross's uneasiness, his innumerable anxieties, and his great capacity for self-pity—qualities Thurber emphasizes—would have made him difficult enough, but then there was the strange way in which he exercised his editorial function. Thurber calls him "by far the most painstaking, meticulous, hairsplitting detail-criticizer

the world of editing has known." And to show what he means, he gives an "opinion sheet" that Ross prepared with regard to a story of Thurber's—three pages of hairs that are split and resplit and then split again.

Ogden Nash wrote Thurber: "He was an almost impossible man to work for—rude, ungracious, and perpetually dissatisfied with what he read; and I admire him more than anyone I have met in professional life." This is the paradox the reader encounters again and again, for if there were persons who couldn't get along with Ross, there were many others who admired him greatly. Thurber himself, as we see clearly by the end of the book, not only admired Ross; he had a strong affection for him. But why he did I do not really know. He does, it is true, give examples of Ross's thoughtfulness, but if these anecdotes demonstrate that the man wasn't always a boor, they fail to convince me thoroughly that he was ever truly likable.

THERE is also the problem of the success of *The New Yorker*, which, after a bad beginning and some years of fumbling, became a cultural phenomenon and a financial miracle. Some people have felt that *The New Yorker* was a success in spite of Ross, and these people will find useful ammunition in Thurber's book. Yet Thurber himself stands squarely on the other side. He recognizes that credit for success must be divided among many individuals, but for him Ross is the central, the essential figure. I know Thurber believes this,

but I still don't know why.

Thurber's pieces on Ross were highly praised as they appeared in *The Atlantic*, and I am sure the book will be praised too, but I am not altogether happy about it. I can't help feeling that, in addition to all the Rosses Thurber shows us, there must have been another Ross and that it was this Ross who edited *The New Yorker*. Ross, as time has proved, was not indispensable; the magazine has gone on, and in certain ways, to my taste it has grown better; but we have the testimony of many persons, Thurber among them, that in the critical years his role was decisive. From an early point in his career Ross was the kind of person about whom stories circulated, just such stories as Thurber has so deftly set forth, so that the man became a legend and a puzzle. In "The Years with Ross," Thurber has given the legend its definitive form, but he has left the puzzle unsolved.





Plea for U.S. Policy of Power

“Germany and the East-West Crisis: The Decisive Challenge to American Policy,” by William S. Schlamm (McKay, 237 pp. \$4), proposes that we seize the wheel in driving bargains with Moscow, and charts the steps necessary to avoid the destruction of NATO. The author’s case is challenging—but arguable—asserts Frank Altschul, who is chairman of the Committee on International Policy of the National Planning Association.

By Frank Altschul

IT IS difficult in a brief review to do full justice to this profoundly disturbing book. William Schlamm writes with passion and conviction, and he has made a contribution to the discussion of the East-West crisis which should be avoided by all those who are reluctant to have some of their most cherished preconceptions questioned. For others, it is “must” reading regardless of whether in the end they find themselves in agreement with the details of his analysis or with his final conclusions. In any event, the thesis he advances is entitled to serious consideration.

The author has no illusions about the nature of the Communist challenge, the gravity of which he feels is still greatly underestimated in the Western world. He maintains that the defensive posture of the United States, and parenthetically of its principal allies, will not serve to check the gradual extension of Soviet power, and he is highly critical of statements emanating from the White House to the effect that “war is unthinkable,” and that “we certainly are not going to fight a ground war in Europe.” Such remarks, in his view, however casually made, cast doubt on the continuing validity of the NATO concept and create an atmosphere of confusion in regard to our purpose and our determination which immensely benefits our adversary.

We must seek, according to Mr. Schlamm, to seize the offensive from the Soviet Union. Rather than remaining in constant perplexity about the next move of Moscow, we must create a situation in which the Kremlin will never be quite certain what we are about to do. In particular, we

must by our conduct make it clear and, above all, *believable* that, notwithstanding this all-pervasive fear of thermonuclear weapons, there are issues over which and circumstances under which we are prepared to accept the risk of war. Failing this, our foreign policy is doomed to prove an ineffectual instrument in the protection of our vital interests.

Because Mr. Schlamm considers the security of Western Europe essential to our own security and a strong Germany bound to us by unbreakable ties essential to the security of Western Europe, the bulk of his book is devoted to a discussion of the situation in Germany as it is today and as it is likely to evolve. Having spent a year or more there recently, he presents an eloquent and detailed report of his findings, leading to the conclusion that with the waning power of Adenauer there is little time left in which to forge the requisite ties.

Much may depend upon the way we meet the crisis that Khrushchev has precipitated over West Berlin. It is the chapter dealing with this which gives Mr. Schlamm’s book unusual timeliness.

The real—the only—intention of the Soviets [he writes] was from the very beginning to maneuver the Allies into recognizing the Ulbricht regime: the recognition of “the other Germany’s” existence is the jimmy with which

WILLIAM S. SCHLAMM, one of this country’s leading commentators on modern Germany, was born and educated in Vienna. In 1932, Schlamm, then twenty-eight, became editor of *Die Weltbuehne*, an anti-Nazi political weekly, published both in Vienna and Berlin. When the situation in Germany worsened, Schlamm came to the United States and went to work for *Fortune* magazine as an editor and assistant to Henry Luce. He returned often to Germany during the Forties on foreign correspondent assignments. During the past year Schlamm lived in Germany, completing the research for his new book.

the Soviets can demolish the entire European structure. For this very reason the Soviet propaganda (invaluably helped by the coarse naïveté of the Western and, particularly, the German press) focused on the alleged Soviet demand that the Allies must withdraw their *troops* from West Berlin. But it does not make the slightest difference to the Soviets whether or not a few thousand isolated United States soldiers remain in West Berlin.

Having demolished most persuasively the myth of the “two Germans,” and having paid his respects to the Communist regime in East Germany as a Quisling government, which it obviously is, Mr. Schlamm argues that “to recognize the ‘German Democratic Republic’ in any fashion at all would not just be a moral but an eminently practical capitulation. An illegally occupied part of Germany would, with one stroke of surrender, be turned into a Communist fortification *inside* Germany.” And he predicts that any such recognition would lead, with the inevitability of Greek tragedy, to the ultimate destruction of NATO.

On the supposition that we surmount the Berlin crisis without the sacrifice of principle or of position, Mr. Schlamm in his concluding chapter prescribes the manner in which he believes we should recapture the initiative. We should, first of all, negotiate “a peace treaty that acknowledges the Bonn government as the sovereign master of all Germany . . . and, having . . . recognized the unviolable sovereignty of Germany, the United States [should] immediately sign a bilateral pact of alliance with that Germany.” This “would reverse the trend in Europe.”

Mr. Schlamm’s case rests on certain assumptions the validity of which is, to say the least, arguable. Because of the limitations of space, only one can be mentioned here: “The very heart of all Communist policies—and this, as I said before, the West has completely failed to comprehend—is their determination to *avoid* armed conflict.” There is much in earlier Soviet writings to support this assumption. Whether it has continuing validity today is seriously questioned by some informed observers. And this, after all, is the nub of the matter.