The Columnists

By CHARLES FISHER

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The Uncorseted Press

On any given day some twenty-five million Americans reverently fold back their newspapers to the Brains Page and gasp in unison over the diverting, although conceivably apocryphal, report that Miss Millicent Rogers sleeps in a night dress lined with chinchilla fur.

Ten million other citizens of the Republic seek more portentous disclosures. They turn to another columnist and discover that the State Department is a dull and uninformed establishment, with only a rudimentary knowledge of what is going on in Europe.

Other groups examine other areas of type and learn that the national administration still persists in blind and wayward muddling, just as they suspected all along. Or that the labor movement is composed entirely of thieves and scoundrels. Or what Premier Stalin really thinks when he selects a magazine, excuses himself, and retires for a time into the privacy so rarely accorded the Great.

Some readers attend upon the military experts, who make heroic surveys of the field from un-armored swivel chairs and offer advice to the armed forces of the earth. Some study the gravely omniscient essayists, seeking to share their privy knowledge of unwritten treaties or the ideological ferments which will wrack
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the Republic of Borrioboolagh six months hence. Some consult the writers upon political affairs, eager to know the result of remote elections for which no candidates have yet been selected. Some are content merely to be re-assured in their belief that the world is going to Hell.

Whatever the yearning of the millions of readers, the columnists of America will oblige. And inasmuch as each group includes a fantastically large number of subscribers, it is clear that these are golden days for columnn— that highly charged type of personal journalism which has come to so elaborate a blossoming in this generation. The trade has, indeed, reached a state where a mere score or so of individual writers command audiences of a size, diversity and devotion unknown either to newspapermen or more retiring literateurs of pre-syndicate generations. The successful columnist of our time engages the instant daily attention of a greater number of clients than any author who ever set quill pen to paper or explored the keyboard of an Underwood with burning forefingers. The broadcasting of his notions is without parallel in the history of print.

Miss Harriet Beecher Stowe reached a meager million of her contemporaries with "Uncle Tom's Cabin"; Mr. Walter Winchell reaches twenty-five million of his with a note upon Miss Rogers’ nightwear. Forty thousand pre-Victorians awaited the later numbers of "Picklewick"; twenty-one million moderns wait for "The Washington Merry-Go-Round" each day. The impli-

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cations of this recent burgeoning of unballasted individualism are awesome, and perhaps a little disquieting.

The columnist is the autocrat of the most prodigious breakfast table ever known. He is the voice beside the cracker barrel amplified to trans-continental dimensions. He is the only non-political figure of record who can clear his throat each day and say "Now, here's what I think . . ." with the assurance that millions will listen. His associates—remembering, it may be, the days before his casual opinions were regarded as canonical—regard him with wonder and a faintly sour envy. The editorial writers of the papers which buy his work envy his freedom from restraint and the loyalty he engenders. The ranking novelists of the age envy his income. Even his readers, it may be conjectured, envy the facility with which he passes daily judgment upon all the perplexities of life. And in truth, there is something enviable in the daily and profitable projection of an unfettered personality.

If Mr. Westbrook Pegler rises of a morning with his liver out of order, the ensuing choler may quite easily become a matter for national debate. If Miss Dorothy Thompson feels a tizzy coming on, she may address a nation instead of husband, household and cook. Mr. Drew Pearson conducts his disputes with Administrative officials in plain sight of all America. Mr. Mark Sullivan and Mr. Frank Kent are not required to confine their morose grunting over the New Deal to their clubs.

The immediate reasons for this pleasant state of
affairs lie, of course, in the gifts which each columnist
brings to the practice of his profession. One prospers
by crying gossip in the streets, and one by an endless
gentlemanly head-shaking over the state of the times.
One parades his elaborate ill-temper. One offers daily,
three-cent views of what is going forward in governing
minds. One offers honest scholarship coupled with
an attitude of disapproval. A few—a very few—pretend
to do nothing more than conduct a reasonable discussion. The most assertive lady in the ranks is noticeable because she seems not infrequently to be clutching her hair in a high wind, whilst she points out that she at least is keeping calm.

But beyond the personal charms upon which the craft
pays off—for the only rule of columnist is that the
product must have readers—there is an ancient and
empty crevice in American journalism which the columnists fill. If they did not, it is doubtful whether the newspapers would have adventured with them. And before any writer’s merits could be tested upon readers, it was necessary that some paper or papers risk a certain amount of space which might otherwise have been devoted to an advertisement, or news of doings at the local luncheon clubs.

Without becoming too didactic about newspaper his-
tory in the United States, it may be suggested that
newspaper character changed very definitely after the
turn of the century. An old air of intimacy, an inten-
sely personal relationship between journal and reader, disappeared under the pressure of speed and
the straining toward size. The Colonial pamphleteer,
who was both our first American columnist and our
first American newspapermen, dealt in an almost neighborly relationship with his readers, although they might be the length of half the Atlantic seaboard apart. He spoke as an individual, even when he spoke in anonymity. The small town papers and small city papers which followed him made no change in the relationship for more than a hundred years. Even as late as the time of the younger James Gordon Bennett and Joseph Pulitzer (in his early and unregenerate stage), the American newspaper was closer in tone to the pamphlet of the Colonial period than to the great, solemn, cold, efficient papers which were already on its heels.

The mood of the newspaper’s owner was perceptible
in its pages. Perhaps it was a mood full of caprice, and
perhaps the owner was less than admirable in devoting
his property to the adjustment of private disagree-
ments. He may have held accuracy second to enter-
tainment as a standard for news stories, and he may
have sold advertising on the basis of a circulation ac-
counting which would cause swooning in the offices of
The Audit Bureau of Circulation Records. He may, in
short, have published a newspaper which would very
properly be rejected with disapproval by the arid and
cultivated taste of this day. He quite probably did.

But there was a sense of humanity about the product,
if one can judge by old files. It was not too large for
the casual grasp of the individual reader, nor was it
so remote that it reduced him to awe or disinterest. Its editorials dealt candidly with likes and dislikes established upon grounds the most indifferent subscriber might comprehend. Its reporting was flavored with personal observation and, more often than not, with personal emotion as well.

Until well after the century ran out, American newspapers retained at least some portion of that spirit which led the elder Bennett, more than a century ago, to cover in person the most scandalous murder of his day. When a beautiful and pliable nymph was slain in one of New York's more genteel bordellos, the proprietor of the Herald settled his beaver in place and sauntered out upon his own to report upon the affair for his subscribers. He wrote a fine, fruity piece, too—perhaps the most spirited bit of publisher-reporting on record.

This is not to argue that the publisher of the New York Times should run his own police beat now. But it does suggest, by a somewhat extreme example, something of the feeling which the newspapers of the United States have either lost or jettisoned by design.

Until recent years, a few were still inspired by the character, beliefs and courage of their owners. In Springfield, Mass., the Republican remained a newspaper of national note for well more than a quarter century after the death of the younger Samuel Bowles. Marse Watterson's Louisville, Ky., Courier-Journal was a national voice until Colonel Watterson's death. In Los Angeles, The Times supports a policy set against the

liberals' conception of progress, but it functions with a skill and force which reflect the driving interest of Norman Chandler. The Denver Post has made newspaper legend. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch has a history of strong purpose and honorable scars, and is one of the great newspaperman's newspapers of the country. The reasoned liberalism of J. David Stern's Philadelphia Record has made that paper a distinguished one.

There may be a small handful of other papers of personal distinction, but they are small, sparse islands in a gray sea. The great portion of the American press has been congealed for years in a pattern which is admirably useful and impeccably dull. In the most important sense, it is past argument the finest press in the world. It is accurate, within the limits of human haste and error, and it is free from control by the national government. Its reporting is trustworthy, if one allows for a little looseness during the high temperatures of political campaigns. It is conscientiously edited and written in a neat, businesslike manner. And its comic strips are the envy of all civilized nations.

But there isn't much in most successful American newspapers to excite living interest, or affection, or dislike. There is, for that matter, very little save the style of type to distinguish one paper from another. A daily in Florida differs from a daily in Maine by the temperatures listed in the weather report, but in no other major particular. The Texas news dealer sells a paper which might, with a change in the vignette
and a swift shift in local stories, be sold with equal success in Seattle or Green Bay. There are even some advantages in this deathly uniformity. National and international news is distributed so impartially by the great wire services that the Hop Bottom, Neb., Patriot is no whit behind the Herald Tribune in reporting progress on a war front or iniquity in Washington. Nor is the Patriot so much as a day late in rushing through the presses diagrams of the newest vexation imposed upon Mr. Dick Tracy. But in the course of breathless alignment with the era of haste, the Hop Bottom Patriot and thousands of other newspapers of one size or another gave up their own characters. They fell into identical designs of brisk and chilly impersonality. Moreover, they waxed in substance thereby.

The age of handouts has been a profitable one for the Press. Scarcely a paper outside the largest cities troubles to maintain a staff in Washington; the Associated Press, the United Press and the International News Service are too easily available with news. The news is complete, accurate and scientifically sterilized. It is calculingly inoffensive to all sides, as any commodity sold to all comers must be.

The papers themselves have developed a similar disinclination to give offense. Journals of the most violent history—newspapers which have at times been stubbornly wrongheaded and at times gloriously right—step timorously now, eschewing opinions which might upset the local Chamber of Commerce. And papers into which founders put their hearts and credit and

honor are viewed by current owners as commercial properties—a little more profitable than a chain of delicatessen stores, a little less dignified than a bank.

The gloomy truth is that the newspaperman as a newspaper publisher has almost vanished from the earth he once troubled so sorely. The owner who stomped in to write his own editorial under the sting of some boiling rage has given way to a board of directors worrying over the Little Dewdrop Drain Cleaner account. When inequity is mentioned, or an unpopular cause, the bookkeeper is called in first. The emasculation of the country’s editorial pages was inevitable under the arrangement. The doctrine of Praise God and Support The Republican Party was too easy to follow. A positive stand might occasionally be taken for the hygienic home, and for legally certified motherhood. But for the rest, docility was counselled, and resistance to change.

This wholesome and dismal sterility supplied the vehicle into which the unpredictable cultures of columning were introduced. Some remnant of the newspaperman’s instinct on the part of publishers, or some subconscious sensing of an emptiness on the part of editors, may have been responsible. In any event, the richness of uncorseted personal opinion has come rushing back in a period of less than twenty years.

It’s difficult to say who was the first columnist, within the modern understanding of the word. Eugene Field was conducting “Sharps And Flats” on the Chicago Daily News in the early ’eighties. The late Burt Leston Taylor’s “Lin O’ Type Or Two” started in the Chicago
Tribune not long thereafter—and is still appearing there, under the current proconsulship of Charles Collins.

Franklin P. Adams initiated the column which was later called "The Coming Tower" in the old New York Mail in 1911, under the title "Always In Good Humor." (His publisher thought that one up, Adams explained dourly in later years). The Philadelphia North American had an established column long before 1900; and in that same city some thirty years ago Ton Daly instituted the appealing column which he now conducts for The Evening Bulletin.

These were local affairs, however celebrated. The columnists about whom it is most profitable to talk today are wafted throughout the nation by syndicates. In fact, largely for the sake of handiness, the hospitality of this book has been extended to very few who fail to address four or five million readers each day. That school of columning most certainly began in the 'twenties and quite probably with the late Heywood Broun. At least, Broun and Walter Lippmann run a dead heat as the writers first to attract the serious attention of the nation. Arthur Brisbane, performing upon a vast scale for William Randolph Hearst, ante-dated them, but his strictures upon men boxing apes and the like appealed to rather a specialized audience. The heavily inspirational Dr. Frank Crane was also of widespread but pallid renown. The honors of H. I. Phillips were popular, and the Broadway column established by S. J. Kauffmann—who has the doubtful honor of creating that form of literature—was widely read by subscribers of the New York Globe.

Columning was still a freak occupation, however, until the New York World demonstrated that the Page Opposite Editorial, or "Op Ed Page," could be more diverting than the editorial page itself. The World established an entire stable of columnists there and so set the tradition most newspapers follow today.

There is a school which holds that the late Alexander Woollcott was the first intellectual newspaper writer. His assignment was as theatre reviewer, but into his critiques there slipped, inevitably, the Woollcottian view of events in no way associated with the drayma. When Broun was moved over from the Sports Department to begin "It Seems To Me" as a general column, he compensated by writing endlessly about the theatre. Walter Lippmann, an editorial writer, did not join the "Op Ed" stable, but he managed to transcend the anonymity of his official position. F. P. A. and his contributors were already on "Op Ed."

The morning World thereupon became the testament for young newspapermen throughout America and, indeed, the only testament most of them acknowledged. Its columnists created a small, articulate and passionately interested following in every state, so that when the paper died in 1931—moribund financially, but admirably sound of mind—it was mourned all out of consequence to its latter importance.

Broun was moved on to the New York World-Telgram and eventually to syndication. Because he is dead,
he can be mentioned only briefly here. It is a pity. He was a great-hearted writer. Somewhere in his early career, Broun must have removed the “Foreign Correspondent” dream from the minds of innumerable young reporters, and substituted for it one labeled “Columnist.” To that degree at least he shares some of the responsibility for the boom in the trade.

The World was not alone in its pioneering. Christopher Morley was writing “The Bowling Green” for the Post in the early ’twenties. In the Sun, and afterward in the Tribune, Don Marquis was being both moving and endlessly diverting with the aid of a philosophic cockroach named archy. O. O. McIntyre had started vending among the hinterlands that eerie version of New York in which the hinterlands preferred to believe. On the Graphic, a very curious paper, Winchell had revised the Kauffman formula and soared to instant glory, converting gossip into an industry overnight. It was Broun, Lippmann and Winchell who were first syndicated of that group. The others did not get west of Hoboken, save in their books and the hearts of subscribers who purchased their papers largely for their work. And it was Broun who first made a major demonstration of the weight of a single opinion entirely apart from—and often in opposition to—that of the paper which was using his stuff.

The precise order in which others of the group, loosely called Think Columnists, followed is of no consequence. Many of them we are to examine, with appropriate biographical excursions. But the aridity of modern newspapers had been ameliorated, for better or worse. Papers with an eye toward experiments bought columnists by the half dozens, discarded some, tried others. Conservative papers bought one nervously, uneasily introduced a second, and wound up in the end with an entire Brains Page. Humorist columnists, morbid columnists, angry columnists, liberal columnists, reactionary columnists, Hollywood columnists, Washington columnists, thoughtful columnists, hick columnists—they arrived, performed according to contract, and flourished or died.

The economic depression of the ’thirties seemed to give the men who were adroit in the handling of ideas their first semblance of indispensability. In a time of torment and confusion, with the smell of war ever on the air from abroad, readers sought by millions for someone who could answer all questions and explain all tangles. The columnists volunteered, each according to his gifts. If an employer or workman looked nervously toward Washington, in uneasiness or hope, he could find a daily dispatch interpreting the activity of the moment and making the future as clear and simple as a crystal bell. Another writer would reduce a labor problem involving three million men to seven hundred lucid words. Searching among others, the reader could find one to fan his anger or sustain his belief or support his misgivings.

No columnist was ever found wanting. No columnist committed professional suicide by saying, “I don’t know . . . I simply don’t know.”
It is doubtful if any of them consciously set up in trade as possessors of inhuman prescience. But certain oracular qualities were almost demanded of them, and there is something tempting, along with something frightening, in sitting down to a stack of blank paper each day. Some 700 or 1000 or 1200 words are required. The trouble under discussion can, with skill, be reduced to that compass. And when the piece is finished, isn't the trouble a long way toward settlement too?

The temptation is intensified by the readers. During one period in his life, before he becomes a columnist, a man sits at a table with other men and tosses his own ball of opinion into the push-and-shove of conversation. He is heeded for a moment, if he is lucky, or he is told coarsely that he is full of hop. In either case, his contribution to the argument receives the same attention as that of his associates.

Once he starts extending the ideas to paper, however, he is overwhelmed by the solemn attention of the public. Learned judges agree with, or write respectful dissent to, such points of law as he makes out of a background of a couple of years hanging around the police courts. Public officials are flattered by his praise and, curiously, by his criticisms. If he has spelled their names right, they begin to call him by his first name. The entire public quite evidently takes him seriously. Is it a matter of wonder that he takes himself seriously himself, no matter what disclaimers he utters through courtesy or caution?

In a sense he is irresponsible. No newspaper stands or falls by his words. In him, as it turns out, the newspapers have found a method of restoring their lost personal fire without possibly awkward aftermaths. They can disclaim responsibility for his ideas or, in a crisis, announce that they have dropped his articles. If they drop him, another paper will take their place. For he is sustained, if he is among the more successful in his craft, by popular habit.

Meanwhile, he finds life an agreeable mixture of opulence and notoriety. He is certainly entitled to take some pride in this, for he is following the most lonely trade on earth; success or failure are built almost entirely upon the stuff which is within himself. He lives by grace of his brains, his style and his wit. Luck may come his way, good or ill, but once he has secured his space in the paper, the chips are down.

In a way, this should temper opinion of columnists. They are faulty and imperfect souls, no matter what their clients believe. But when they are seated at their typewriters they are, poor devils, beyond all human help.
It Seems to Me
1925-1935

By Heywood Broun

Harcourt, Brace and Company
New York
"A FINE LESSON FOR THE WHOLE NATION"

Comment on the San Jose lynching constitutes an obligatory column.

In the beginning it seemed to me as if this thing were so monstrously and obviously evil that it would be enough to say calmly and simply, "Here is one more sadistic orgy carried on by a psychopathic mob under the patronage of the moronic governor of a backward state."

To my amazement I found not only condonation but actual praise for the lynchers in no less than three New York newspapers. I read of "the vigilantes" and "the pioneer spirit" and so on.

Let us examine the evidence to see if there is any reason at all to ascribe the deed to the full-flowered resentment of an aroused public spirit.

Here is the story of the lynching as told by an 18-year-old ranch boy who asserted that he was leader of the movement:

"I was the first one of the gang to break into the jail. I came to town in the afternoon and saw the crowd around the jail. I decided to organize a 'necktie' party. Mostly I went to the speakeasies and rounded up the gang there. That is why so many of the mob were drunk. The word got spread around that it was going to be a Santa Clara University student lynching. But I'm not a Santa Clara student. I didn't go to college. I knew Brooke Hart by sight, but never had spoken to him. I thought that his terrible murder should be avenged. I found that several hundred others thought the same thing."

In other words, a farm boy who came into town for a spree managed to hit upon a drunken crowd which was willing to defend the American home and its institutions for the fun of it.

Governor Rolph has called it "a fine lesson to the whole nation." And a New York newspaper says in its leading editorial, "Nobody that we've heard of or talked to appears to disagree with the mob or disapprove of what Governor Rolph said."

All right; talk to me. Or better still read these selections from a United Press dispatch:

"Thurmond was unconscious, and probably dead, when the noose was placed around his neck. He had been beaten and kicked senseless. A boy, not more than 16, climbed to the top of a shed and shouted in a shrill voice, 'Come on, fellows!' He was the leader the mob had been waiting for. A new cry went up, 'Let's burn 'em!' Thurmond's body was cut down. It was drenched with gasoline. A match was touched to it, but only his torn clothing burned.'"

Governor James Rolph Jr. has been quoted as saying that he would like to turn over all jail inmates serving sentences for kidnapping into the custody of "those fine, patriotic San Jose citizens, who know how to handle such a situation."

"Thousands of men, women and children looking on in carnival spirit cheered with a lustiness which could be heard for blocks."

"Both were dragged across the park, their bruised and torn bodies leaving trails of blood."

And so the fine old pioneer spirit of California, under the leadership of that fine old nature lover, Jim Rolph, has

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"A Fine Lesson for the Whole Nation"
“A Fine Lesson for the Whole Nation”

ended kidnapping in the great commonwealth of California. And what has it left in its wake? It has left an obscene, depraved and vile memory in the minds of thousands who stood about and cheered lustily.

“Some of the children were babies in their mothers' arms.”

If it were possible to carry on a case history of every person in the mob who beat and kicked and hanged and burned two human beings I will make the prophecy that out of this heritage will come crimes and cruelties which are unnumbered. The price is too high.

Every mother and father of a son wants to have him protected against the danger of kidnapping. But how would you like it if it were your 16-year-old boy who climbed to the top of a shed and shouted in a shrill voice, “Come on, fellows!”?

Governor James Rolph Jr. has said with audacious arrogance, “If anyone is arrested for the good job I'll pardon them all.”

It does not lie within the power of the governor of California to pardon the men and boys and women and children who cried out, “Let's burn 'em!” For them there is no pardon this side of the Judgment Seat. To your knees, Governor, and pray that you and your commonwealth may be washed clean of this bath of bestiality into which a whole community has plunged.

You, James Rolph Jr., stand naked in the eyes of the world. “I'll pardon them all,” you say. Is this to be the measure of justice in California? Men with blood and burnt flesh on their hands are to be set free. Mooney must remain in jail. Freedom for the guilty. Punishment for the innocent.

Governor, very frankly, I don't believe you can get away with it. There must be somewhere some power which just won't stand for it.


The Arts of Inactivity

ization of Amateur Radish Growers is likely to treble its membership within the next few years. I hope and expect that the crop of Sunday painters will be vastly augmented. All existing standards of golf are certain to be lowered by the influx of new recruits. The artisan golfer who is well known in England will soon be making his appearance here and challenging the supremacy of the idle rich. Glee clubs and amateur theatricals will flourish. The professional stage will come back into its own.

And it may even be that every now and then somebody will buy a book. And from the point of view of the publishers that will be authentically a revolution.

"I WAS NEVER MORE SERIOUS IN MY LIFE"

There used to be a play—there will always be a play—in which the heroine says, "I was never more serious in my life."

And in that phrase, while thousands paid not the slightest attention, I could write my autobiography.

Only yesterday a young man said, "Now, honestly, Mr. Broun, these so-called radical columns of yours merely represent what seems to you shrewd journalism? Am I right?"

And he was not right. It is perhaps a little less than logical to demand that everybody who means what he says should put on a hair shirt and go into the desert to eat locusts and

"I Was Never More Serious in My Life"

wild honey. But if there is no other way I will do that. My weakness and infirmity of purpose are such that I should prefer not to make my reservations for another two years. But I could be speeded up.

If you grin upon occasion, or take a drink, or stay up after 1 A.M. you become immediately a playboy who is fooling around with notions merely for the thrill which he gets in shocking people.

I do think it's fun to shock people. It seems to me a square deal all around. And yet I have not been conspicuously successful in achieving anything of the sort. And on the few occasions in which I have succeeded the result has come quite unwittingly. My great surprise lies in the fact that people are startled by postulates which appear to me self-evident.

We live in a cockeyed world and I am astonished at such times as fellow passengers fail to grasp that fact. Today I can pick up any paper and find that somebody honestly believes that there will be an end of crime if only justice is "fast" and includes the electric chair and the whipping post. How can they think anything so fantastic? Boiling oil, the rack and thumbscrews have never worked so well, and so I do not understand why anybody should believe that effeminate modifications of ancient tortures can prevail. And I'm not fooling.

I read of Hitler and his scheme to make over a downtrodden nation in its own image and I am not only puzzled but aghast that he should seriously believe that any such scheme can possibly work. The conquering countries imposed terms upon the German people which are preposterous. But is it reasonable, logical, or even sane to say, "Because we have been beaten with whips we will attack with
“I Was Never More Serious in My Life”

scorpions a minority within our own community to prove that we are virile and unterrified?”

And when I read of those who are exiled, disfranchised, scorned, expelled, I observe that these are the very names upon which the glory and the fame of Germany repose. Just who is crazy and insincere if I venture the mild query as to how culture can be created by uprooting its most significant exponents?

And when I turn from foreign news I observe that there is a movement on foot to prove the superiority of the white race by the commission of things unspeakable and cruel and wholly insane. “I’ll show you the proof of our high civilization by lynching you to a tree.” Does that make sense? It does not.

And through the world and its byways today the great push seems to come from those who wish to save face by treading with hobnails upon the heads of others. I am a little sick and tired of being classed as soft, bourgeois and sentimental if I say that human brotherhood could solve overnight the problems concerning which men shake their heads and say, “It is too bad but insurmountable.”

Who says so? It is said by those who have never given even a passing trial to understanding. It is said by those who cannot grasp the notion of a world in which we work for glory and not for profit. It is said by the keepers and the purveyors of mean advantage and destructive selfishness.

And I was never more serious in my life.