

# Some Journalism Blasts From the Past

By Carl Sessions Stepp

Journalism history is thick with characters and personalities, and the past year brought interesting studies of several. Here are some notable ones:

## Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist

By Brooke Kroeger  
Times Books  
632 pages, \$27.50

**O**ddly, Elizabeth Jane Cochran has slipped into the sidebar section of journalism history, remembered mainly as one of the "stunt reporters" whose gimmicks lured turn-of-the-century readers. While "daredevil" may be what has endured, "reporter" and "feminist" equally apply.



Bly

Indeed, she was "the best reporter in America," Arthur Brisbane wrote in the *New York Journal* on her death in 1922.

Bly took her pen name at the Pittsburgh Dispatch because ladies of the day didn't use their true identities in the papers. She went on to cover wars, labor strife, foreign affairs and boxing matches. She ran her own factory, the Iron Clad Manufacturing Co., where she designed plant machinery, personally held 25 patents, and created "a model of social welfare for her 1,500 employees." And she devoted later years and fortune to the plight of unwed mothers and orphans.

Bly's range was striking. She provided analytical coverage from Mexico and addressed leading social topics, such as labor issues and sexual politics.

But, true enough, it was the audacious masquerades and posings that cinched her fame. For her first assignment at the *New York World* she feigned insanity, got herself committed to an asylum and produced a sensational series, "Ten Days in a Mad-House."

She also posed as, among many others, a patent medicine merchant (to bribe a powerful lobbyist), a charity hospital patient, a chorus girl and even a female job applicant at newspapers (where she was routinely patronized). In her best-remembered stunt, she circled

the globe in 72 days, faster than anyone else in history or literature, beating Phileas Fogg's "Around the World in Eighty Days."

Kroeger, a veteran wire service and magazine writer, tells this remarkable story briskly and thoroughly. Her work is both a good read and an important historical rescue mission.

## Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity

By Neal Gabler  
Knopf  
684 pages, \$30

**S**till another shadowy figure is Walter Winchell, best remembered perhaps as the reedy-voiced narrator of the old "Untouchables" series. But Winchell, too, earned status as an icon: the man who perfected the gossip column and demolished "the long-standing barrier between the private and the public."

Neal Gabler, an author and former movie critic, has written a detailed but fast-moving biography of this man who was a feared force in journalism for 40 years.



Winchell

In Winchell's heyday of the 1930s and 1940s, two-thirds of American adults either read his daily column (written for Hearst but syndicated in more than 2,000 papers) or heard his radio show. Hemingway even dubbed him, hyperbolically one would hope, "the greatest newspaper man that ever lived."

Often controversial, Winchell began as something of a common person's champion, with his signature radio greeting, "Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. America...."

But Winchell hardened as he grew older, rupturing friendships, embracing the likes of Joseph McCarthy, cozying with both J. Edgar Hoover's FBI and various mob figures, and winding up as a "cruel, spiteful rumormonger." At his funeral in 1972, his daughter was the only mourner.

Gabler's book is especially valuable because he sees here not just one man's story but a parable about "the cutthroat world of celebrity."

As Gabler perceptively observes,

Winchell understood that gossip had a "bitter subtext." It offered ordinary people "a weapon of empowerment," a chance to gain symbolic intimacy with the celebrated, to mock their foibles and sometimes to engineer their downfall. Ironically, or perhaps inevitably, as Winchell strutted his way across the public stage, he too was headed for comeuppance. One by one, his friends and supporters fell away, and in 1967 Hearst canceled his column, ending a 38-year run.

## More Than a Muckraker: Ida Tarbell's Lifetime in Journalism

Edited by Robert C. Kochersberger Jr.  
University of Tennessee Press  
242 pages, \$36.95

**L**ike her contemporary Bly, Ida Tarbell is another writer whose vague, semi-mythic status lives on, even though her actual work remains obscure.

In this carefully edited collection of 26 of her pieces, Robert Kochersberger shows that Tarbell was "more than a muckraker." She was an early literary journalist who "helped to invent modern journalism and...was a more rigorous, systematic journalist than almost anyone before or since."

The selections cover topics ranging from Abraham Lincoln's funeral to mining safety to female inventors to efforts to raise the "moral standard" of Cincinnati.

Especially striking is how Tarbell crafted evidence-based journalistic essays in a passionate but even-toned voice. In her landmark series on John D. Rockefeller and his Standard Oil Co., for instance, she managed to endorse both the pursuit of profit and the need for humane management. In her many articles on women, she defended both equal-pay-for-equal-work and her belief that a woman's central duty was child-rearing and home-making.

Kochersberger, a North Carolina State journalism professor, offers thoughtful, succinct introductions to each selection.



Tarbell

Continued on page 51

Continued from page 49

**Nothin' But Good Times Ahead**

By Molly Ivins  
Vintage  
256 pages, \$12

**F**ort Worth Star-Telegram columnist Molly Ivins is not yet a historical character. But her latest collection, reissued in paperback, deserves a mention now that the Republican Ascendancy is at hand.

Like most humorists, she's at her best as an outsider torching the in-crowd. So Ivins, a left-leaning populist, will no doubt surge now in her patented

role, as a wisass who's genuinely wise.

This collection (disappointingly, it has neither a table of contents nor index) sights her usual targets: hapless politicians and legislators. But Ivins also engages everything from author Camille Paglia ("a crassly egocentric, raving twit") to a boar chase through Austin.

Not the least of her victims are her "brethren and sistren" in the press, and this book is worth its cost for its description (see the preface) of what political reporting has to do with monkey feces. ●

*Stepp, an AJR senior editor, teaches at the University of Maryland College of Journalism.*

**The Newhouse Media Empire**

**Newhouse: All the Glitter, Power and Glory of America's Richest Media Empire and the Secretive Man Behind It**

By Thomas Maier  
St. Martin's Press  
446 pages, \$24.95

By Linda Fibich

**T**homas Maier, a reporter for New York *Newsday*, begins his critical biography of S.I. Newhouse Jr. with a quote attributed to Alfred A. Knopf: "A publisher is known by the company he keeps." In fact, it is chiefly by this measure that you get to know Si Newhouse, for Maier's subject did not cooperate with him.

But the company Newhouse keeps through the years is a fascinating one. It includes the late Congressman Allard Lowenstein and the late Roy Cohn, both boyhood friends. It includes the denizens of Condé Nast—Alex Liberman, the editorial director who colluded in, and thereby survived, Newhouse's management-by-guillotine at Condé Nast; Anna Wintour, *Vogue's* stylish and tough-as-nails editor; Tina Brown, whose resuscitated *Vanity Fair* won her a new playground at the *New Yorker*.

The book, like Si Newhouse's life, starts slowly. As Maier tells it, S.I. Jr. didn't emerge from the shadow of his famous father until S.I. Sr. died in 1979. "Newhouse" plods through those early years, hampered at times by its style. (Maier also has annoying lapses of gram-

mar and spelling throughout the book.)

But "Newhouse" picks up steam after 90 pages with the introduction of right-wing lawyer Roy Cohn. From there forward, Maier builds a chilling case that, if Newhouse is the exemplar, concentration of media ownership has perverted the free flow of information in the United States.

Cohn, we are told, assisted mob interests in getting Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* to retract an investigative story in the early 1980s, one that accurately identified Jackie Presser, then aspiring to the Teamsters' presidency, as a government informant. At the time, Cohn was simultaneously lawyering for Newhouse and for "Fat Tony" Salerno, chief of New York's Genovese crime family. When the retraction was published, the *Plain Dealer* was picketed by members of its editorial staff.

Cohn also turns up on the cover of *Parade*, the Newhouse-owned Sunday supplement, using his tax problems to give 21 million readers "a piece of his mind about the Internal Revenue Service." The story was published while Si Newhouse and his brother, Donald, as executors of their father's estate, contested a \$942 million tax bill.

Maier takes us into the courtroom for that tax trial, an event the press largely ignored. He argues persuasively that Si Newhouse's win there—which reduced the family's estate taxes to \$48 million—was pivotal in the purchases of *Random House* and the *New Yorker*.

He documents Newhouse's influence on U.S. book publishing during the 1980s, when blockbuster titles started crowding out what another era's readers regarded as literature.

At Condé Nast, Maier tells us, Newhouse perfected a method of glitzy presentation that deliberately blurs "the distinction between editorial and advertising, the difference between what was used to inform and what was used to sell."

Maier has Tina Brown explain the genius of her *Vanity Fair*: "It's important for a magazine to have lapses in taste. If you don't, you're going to be completely bland."

Then he critiques her *New Yorker*. Under Brown, he says, "perhaps the finest magazine this country has ever known" has lost its "essential voice...that gentle manner that provided the perfect backdrop for powerful reporting on society's most difficult issues."

Maier coins the term "trickle-down media" for the overall structure of the Newhouse empire. The family's newspaper group, he argues, is a mere financial engine for the glittering magazines and books published for a more demographically desirable elite. He doesn't ignore the newspapers' recent strides toward quality (see "A New Era at Newhouse," November 1994); he regards them as spotty and an insignificant piece of the larger Newhouse equation.

But if Maier is tough on Si Newhouse, he doesn't spare the rest of us. "By the 1990s, many of America's media companies finally recognized a free press for what the Newhouses always knew it to be: a powerful machine to reap an endless fortune," he writes. "Eventually, many writers realized that to get paid in an increasingly consolidated marketplace, they would have to adapt to the new rules of the game."

His research for the book was a case in point. Roughly half of those Maier interviewed talked only after assurances that they would not be named. "The fear of being cut off from Si Newhouse's company is the most common refrain when writers, editors and other publishing types talk about him," Maier observes.

The implication for unfettered journalism is as troubling as it is unavoidable. ●

*Fibich, a former Milwaukee Journal assistant managing editor, wrote about Newhouse's newspapers in our November 1994 issue. She teaches at the University of Maryland College of Journalism.*



Maier

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