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# More Arrows Bouncing Off the Great H. L. Mencken

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RICHARD W. WILCKE

Few public figures of the twentieth century, regardless of their achievements or fame, have had as much published about them as Henry Louis Mencken, American journalist and critic, 1880–1956. In Baltimore, the city in which he lived his entire life and for which he had special affection, there exists to this day a membership society and a quarterly literary journal, each devoted exclusively to him. Higher-quality academic libraries catalog at least seventy-five books by or about him, and even a cursory Internet search will confirm that he continues to rank among America's most quoted authors.

In spite of the books he wrote and the magazines he edited, Mencken was primarily a newspaperman, a profession he joined in 1899 at the age of eighteen and one he was still practicing in 1948, when his last column was published just weeks before a severe stroke left him unable to read or write. During that five-decade span, he produced by his own estimate some ten million words of copy, most of them reflecting his own firmly held views, and every line well written, even in letters and memos. His particular interests were culture and politics, but for a number of years he was also an influential literary critic.

H. L. Mencken earned his prominence for two reasons. He was “the greatest and most widely imitated prose stylist ever to grace the pages of an American newspaper” (Yardley 1989, 2B). Even many who detest his opinions agree with that assessment. In truth, nothing written *about* Mencken has ever been as enjoyable or as insightful as anything written *by* him. He is known also for his *Weltanschauung*, which was grounded in two convictions: an unqualified devotion to political and intellectual

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freedom, and an intense loathing for demagogues, whether religious, political, or other. His corollaries were a contempt for politicians, an opposition to wars, an aversion to the inevitable results of democracy, a lack of respect for evangelicals, and a disdain for those superstitious and ignorant masses who revered charlatans.

Considering how openly Mencken confessed his own thinking—not only in published writings but in thousands of letters, memos, and journal entries—and considering that he was as unambiguous a writer as the English language has ever had, one might be excused for asking why his opinions and personality should continue to require new analyses. Previously unpublished writings, unsealed over the past few decades, revealed nothing of substance that had not been known widely for years. Granted, their tone was “darker,” but that was the very reason he had arranged to seal them for twenty-five and thirty-five years after his death.

Aside from the obvious point that Mencken books are respectable and profitable, one lamentable reason for the attention he continues to receive seems to be a desire among some to diminish the impact of his ideas by discrediting his character. Of all the attacks since he died, the most damaging has been the one that would have astonished him most: the idea that he was an anti-Semite. Although he sought to evoke powerful reactions in readers, his goal was never to persuade so much as to entertain and thereby to sell more newspapers, magazines, or books. He was a compulsive writer with little hope of changing the world. He didn’t mind being criticized or attacked for his views, but never would he have anticipated that he, of all people, would, or could, be branded seriously as anti-Semitic.

## Mencken’s Diary

What was the source of this accusation? The tale actually begins in the 1940s, when Mencken decided that he would leave his books, files, and unpublished manuscripts to Baltimore’s Enoch Pratt Free Library, a local institution to which he felt greatly indebted, having availed himself of its facilities since boyhood. His sole dilemma pertained to a personal journal that he had maintained off and on since 1930. Because he liked putting his thoughts on paper and once entertained the idea of writing an autobiography, he had begun to enter his private musings and spontaneous feelings in a diary. As he prepared his papers, he worried because his diary, overly blunt and unedited, was not suited for publication.

Still, Mencken could not shake the idea that his journal, though far from priceless, might be useful and interesting someday to serious historians as a first-person resource. After all, as a practicing journalist, he had covered key events and had enjoyed the opportunity to know many prominent people of the 1930s and 1940s. After pondering the matter at length, he decided that he would entrust the library with the material. However, to ensure that the diary’s spontaneous and off-the-cuff contents would not offend any living persons, he put the whole thing in five secure boxes and carefully labeled each one with precise instructions regarding when and to whom they should be opened.

The exact wording of the box labels was as follows: *“This diary is to be deposited by my Executors on the understanding that it is not to be put at the disposal of readers until 25 years after my death, and is then to be open only to students engaged in critical or historical investigation, approved after proper inquiry by the Chief Librarian”* (qtd. in Fecher 1989, xxi, emphasis added). Seemingly any objective person reading the second phrase—“to be open only to [approved] students engaged in critical or historical investigation”—would conclude without question that its author clearly intended that the contents were *not* to be circulated or mass published.

Unfortunately, after twenty-five years some officials of the library, envisioning an opportunity for the institution to profit at last from its long association with Mencken, were anything but objective. After debating for a few years, they decided in 1985 to ask Stephen Sachs, then the Maryland state attorney general, for a legal ruling on the library’s right to publish the Mencken diary. (Some Marylanders still remember Sachs because of his commitment to interest-rate controls, which caused MBNA, a huge national credit-card company, to leave Baltimore, the place of its founding, for Wilmington, Delaware.) To no one’s surprise, Sachs’s Mencken decision gave those who asked for it precisely what they wanted.

Aspiring to become governor, Sachs welcomed media attention, so he made an effort to garner headlines and editorials with his announcement. He ended his ruling with these words: “It is our opinion that neither Mencken’s memorandum to his executors nor the Enoch Pratt Free Library’s receipt for the papers delivered to it constitutes a legally enforceable prohibition against the publication of Mencken’s diaries. Mencken, a self-styled ‘congenital disbeliever in laws,’ once dismissed all lawyers as ‘obscurantists.’ But in this case, at least, the law is clear and permits no other conclusion” (qtd. in Fecher 1989, xxiii).

To their credit, some trustees of the library argued that the institution had a moral obligation to abide by Mencken’s wishes, regardless of the legalities. However, with the passage of time and in the light of a book publisher’s estimate of the diary’s market value, a majority of the library’s board eventually decided to share Mencken’s personal notes with as many as might be induced to buy a hardbound copy. *The Diary of H. L. Mencken*, edited by Charles A. Fecher, hit bookstores in 1989 and was at once widely reviewed. Many reviewers, presumably too harried to read the 476 pages by Mencken, relied instead on Fecher’s 20-page introduction to get an idea of the diary’s contents.

### Fecher’s Accusation

Naturally, of particular interest was whether the diaries revealed anything new about Mencken. Fecher, in what seemed at the time to be either pitiful naïveté or a crass attempt to enhance sales, gave the reviewers a bombshell when he wrote these words: “Let it be said at once, clearly and unequivocally: Mencken was an anti-Semite” (1989, xix).

To be sure, Mencken had been accused of anti-Semitism once before, in a malicious biography by Charles Angoff published in 1956, but the charge died when Jewish friends and acquaintances leaped en masse to his defense. Unfortunately, in 1989, as Mencken had expected when he sealed the diary for twenty-five years, few of his contemporaries were still alive. The Fecher indictment stuck, even though the diary itself contained no such unequivocal evidence, and even though Fecher himself equivocated. He acknowledged, in part on the very same page, that Mencken had defended Jews' civil rights, that most of his closest friends were Jews, that he had stood up for the Jews in pre-World War II Germany, that he had written against anti-Semitism, and that he had repeatedly denied publicly and privately that he harbored such feelings.

So why would a longtime admirer of Mencken such as Charles Fecher have branded him an anti-Semite? Fecher, after all, had authored a 1978 volume entitled *Mencken: A Study of His Thought*, and he had been editor of the quarterly journal *Menckeniana*. The truth is that Charles Fecher, like others, was guilty of what an anonymous reviewer for *The Economist* called "self-righteous generational chauvinism." Fecher believed Mencken to be an anti-Semite, he explained, because Mencken often referred to people as Jews or in so-called "Jewish terms." Though acknowledging that ethnic stereotyping was common at the time, he believed his hero "ought to have been able to rise above" his peers. On this trivial foundation was the reputation of an accomplished and honorable man damaged.

After 1989, two other manuscripts were opened by the library and commercially published. Labeled differently than the diaries, these writings had been sealed for thirty-five years after Mencken's death and undoubtedly had been intended for publication. *My Life as Author and Editor*, edited by Jonathan Yardley, came out in 1993, and *Thirty-five Years of Newspaper Work*, edited by Fred Hobson, Vincent Fitzpatrick, and Bradford Jacobs, was published in 1994. According to Yardley, "if by the standards of our day Mencken was anti-Semitic, by those of his own he was not. Inasmuch as he lived in his time and not in ours, it is by this we should judge and, I believe, acquit him" (Yardley 1993, xiii). Hobson, Fitzpatrick, and Jacobs concluded that "in matters of race and ethnicity, Mencken was, like the rest of us, imperfect. Yet he was also a staunch defender of civil liberty for all people regardless of heritage, color, gender, or social class" (1994, xviii).

## Enter Teachout

Terry Teachout's name was linked with that of Mencken in 1994 with the publication of *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*. He discovered this collected-but-never-published work in the closet of the Mencken room of the Enoch Pratt Free Library. As a reward for bringing the material for yet another profitable book to the attention of library officials, Teachout was appointed the editor. He was probably unaware that a bound copy of the second chrestomathy had long existed in the library of the University of Louisville. In the 1940s, Mencken shipped the collection to Victor Reno, a friend in

California. Reno had it bound with Mencken's title on the front, and when he left his collection to the University of Louisville, this chrestomathy was included. Teachout's prestige, and presumably his bank account, nevertheless benefited from his good luck.

Because Teachout was believed to be an admirer of Mencken, many had high hopes for his biography. In the early 1990s, his plan was announced with almost a fanfare at a meeting of the Mencken Society, yet the finished book, *The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken* (2002), did not appear until a full decade later. For true aficionados, it is a disappointment. Not only is it far from the most appealing of the Mencken biographies, but it exudes a spiteful tone, almost as if Teachout grew tired of his task and jealous of his subject. Reviewers predisposed to disparage Mencken can find plenty of ammunition; those looking to defend him have received little.

In his introduction, Teachout says he approached Mencken "from his [Mencken's] point of view," which he boasts makes him "unlike Mencken's previous biographers." Yet throughout the book, he constantly denigrates his subject for aspects of his life that no other biographer ever did. For example, he ridicules Mencken for never having moved from Baltimore, suggesting that he was provincial and lacked worldliness. And because Mencken supported and lived with his widowed mother for years, Teachout scorns him as a "mama's boy." He repeatedly makes it clear that he considers Mencken conceited, egocentric, and opinionated, and he appears to get pleasure from reinforcing the increasingly standard view of Mencken as a misanthrope. In the most glaring confusion of all, he brands him intellectually and philosophically inconsistent.

The book begins with a detailed description of a well-known incident at the Gridiron Club in 1934, an event at which Franklin D. Roosevelt slyly read, without attribution, one of Mencken's own essays critical of journalists, hoping thereby to embarrass him. Although this mockery was irksome, especially because Mencken had no opportunity for rebuttal, it was not an emotional blow. Mencken had a thick skin, and he scarcely mentioned the incident in his diary. Teachout theorizes, however, that it was so deeply humiliating that, more than anything else, it accounted for Mencken's hatred of FDR. Aside from the lack of evidence, this interpretation overlooks the fact that Mencken also disliked Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. The truth is that in FDR's domestic and foreign policies and in his emotional appeals to the masses, he embodied almost everything that Mencken had long disliked. The Gridiron Club incident was nothing.

Another shortcoming is Teachout's conclusion that Mencken's views on many issues resulted in large part from an obsession with all things German, including a strong admiration for Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher about whom Mencken wrote a book in 1907. Rather than acknowledge the effort as a tremendous achievement at a time when Nietzsche's name was barely known and little of his work had been translated, Teachout condescendingly calls Mencken's reading of Nietzsche "superficial" and his book "shallow." He contends both that Mencken presented his own thoughts as Nietzsche's and also that Nietzsche's ideas heavily influenced Mencken.

The truth is that for his part, Mencken discounted Nietzsche's influence. Yet Teachout, throughout his book, boldly explains certain of Mencken's perspectives as the prejudices of a displaced German nationalist with little other coherent philosophy.

Other grievances can be raised regarding Teachout's approach, such as his frequent attempts to give passages a desired tone by juxtapositioning statements or quotes uttered or written decades apart as if they were somehow related. Most annoying, however, are his many interpretations, impressions, and snide comments for which he offers no citations or references. Countless examples are possible; a couple will suffice to render the flavor: "Certain that FDR was scheming to lure America into World War II, Mencken failed to grasp the full extent of Nazi Germany's depravity. Blinded partly by his hatred of Roosevelt and partly by his familial affection for German culture . . . he adopted an isolationist line that at its worst was rigid and callous beyond belief" (2002, 9). The problem, of course, is that Mencken was far from the only one then or now to suspect that FDR was scheming to lure America into the European war. And prior to the war, almost no one grasped the "full extent of Nazi Germany's depravity." Many others held Mencken's "isolationist line" on principle, and there is no reason to conclude that his view was a result of either his German heritage or his contempt for FDR. In any event, this passage is pure Teachout: he provides no notes to support either of these claims.

Consider another Teachout passage:

A few [of the reviewers who disliked *Notes on Democracy*] grasped its fundamental defect, which is that nowhere does Mencken offer an alternative to representative democracy. . . . "I enjoy democracy immensely. It is incomparably idiotic, and hence incomparably amusing. Does it exalt dunderheads, cowards, trimmers, frauds, cads? Then the pain of seeing them go up is balanced and obliterated by the joy of seeing them come down." Not only is this flippancy unworthy of the moral outrage evident in the rest of the book, it is yet another manifestation of Mencken the poseur, unwilling to admit his own passion (230).

Teachout obviously has no obligation to be persuaded by Mencken's case against democracy, but the lack of an alternative form of government can scarcely be the "fundamental defect" of that case. Elsewhere, Teachout is critical of some mildly approving observations Mencken made about the German state prior to World War I. The likelihood is that Mencken, having been attacked as a sympathizer when anti-German hate was not only politically correct but official government policy, decided to focus only on democracy's faults. The intensity and sincerity with which he approached this issue made him anything but a poseur.

In a perverse way, Teachout's book portrays Mencken as somewhat dishonest for living an ordered, conventional life when readers believed he was an irreligious rogue; for remaining prudently sober when his stance on beer and Prohibition made him

appear a continual drunk; and for clinging to such bourgeois values as diligence, honesty, and courtesy. Because Mencken was not religious and therefore did not accept the idea of God's will for his life, Teachout portrays him as a sad, lonely skeptic whose life was bereft of meaning. Most reviewers, who have read virtually nothing by Mencken and not much more about him, ignorantly call him a skeptic, a curmudgeon, a misanthrope, and even a reprobate.

At length, however, what is most disappointing in *The Skeptic* is that Teachout simply cannot bring himself to forgive Mencken for "being aware" of Jews and especially for seeming to have detested FDR more than he did Adolf Hitler, based on a comparison of how much he wrote on each during the 1930s. Presumably, those who criticized Lyndon Johnson more often than Ho Chi Minh should have had their patriotism questioned. Much of the book is devoted to Mencken's attitudes about and references to Jews, and indeed one gains a distorted impression from the inordinate emphasis on that topic. Teachout goes back and forth on the subject, and although he seems unable to muster sufficient evidence for a clear-cut opinion, he writes, "In the end, one grows weary of hair-splitting," whereupon he affirms for those who have yet to make up their own minds about Mencken's character that he must have been an anti-Semite.

Terry Teachout is a capable journalist, but the biography that H. L. Mencken deserves is still unpublished. Sooner or later, an author who admires, appreciates, and understands him as a writer, a thinker, and a man will settle his score for all time.

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