
The Colonel and the Lady

Joseph Epstein

I got a message from [Robert] Redford that they had decided not to shoot the one scene [in All the President's Men] in which I was portrayed. I was told that no one understood the role of a publisher, and it was too extraneous to explain.

—KATHARINE GRAHAM

WHAT DO newspaper publishers do? Traditionally, they have been owners of the majority share of stock in a paper. They have had ultimate responsibility for the paper's financial fate. They have tended to represent it before the city in which it is published. In matters of newspaper policy—especially in disputes over that policy—they are the final arbiters. They determine the (general) editorial position, the candidates the paper will endorse for political office, the causes to which it is sympathetic or antipathetic. The analogy begging to be made here is with the captain of a ship, except that in this case the captain happens also to be the owner.

Which brings me to that Captain Ahab among publishers, Robert Rutherford McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune*: the "World's Greatest Newspaper," as he called it and certainly believed it to be. Colonel McCormick—he earned his commission and hence his military title in World War I—was, at 6'7," a large man with obsessions to match. He

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was one of those rich boys—a McCormick of the reaper McCormicks—who became even richer through daring, industry, and acumen. And he was an Ahab with more than one white whale: among the Colonel's nemeses were the British empire, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and everything to do with the New Deal. Colonel McCormick was more than a bit of a nut, but—this needs to be added—an authentically great nut, extravagant in every way and, in his lifetime, a figure about whom no one could be neutral.

When I was a boy growing up in Chicago during World War II, the *Chicago Tribune* was not permitted in our house. As apolitical as my father was, he managed to keep a cold spot in his heart for the World's Greatest Newspaper and its publisher. His doing so deprived me of *Dick Tracy*, the *Katzenjammer Kids*, and others of the best comics in the country, which the Colonel had cleverly signed on years before. What some of us have had to suffer for politics!

The reason the *Trib* was not allowed in our house was that, along with Charles Lindbergh, Joseph Kennedy, Frank Lloyd Wright, and other notable Americans of the day, the Colonel was an America Firster and an isolationist. He viewed the war as essentially a British plot, if not an invention, and saw no reason to lose American lives to shore up the English in Europe. That the European Jews were simultaneously and systematically being massacred left him, as they say, nothing daunted.

But the war was just one subject—albeit a huge

one—among many. The Colonel could work Chicagoans into a frenzy faster than Billy Sunday could bring in souls. So confident were his newspaper's editorials, so happily biased his coverage of events, that people who felt differently about the world would use the *Trib* to start their blood running. My father tells a story about getting a flat tire in a snowstorm. When a *Chicago Tribune* delivery truck pulled up and the driver asked if he could help, my father told him to go straight to hell. The Colonel could have that effect, even on a calm man.

Eventually, after the Colonel died in 1955, my father backed down and began to allow the *Trib* in the house. He did so, I should report, because he needed its classified pages for his own business. For besides the best funny pages, the *Trib* had far and away the best classified section in town; it also had the best sports section, the best foreign coverage, and much else, too. It may not have been the World's Greatest Newspaper, but it was, outside of its general editorial line, a very useful one. The Colonel, for all his zaniness, was a great newspaperman.

THE MEASURE of his greatness, and the quality of his zaniness, have now been taken into lengthy and I believe accurate account by Richard Norton Smith in *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick*.^{*} Smith's book is rich in detail, impressive in background material, and written with felicitous touches of irony. If the book has a major weakness, it may be that Smith does not really—not finally—penetrate the Colonel's character. Nor is he quite successful in showing this extraordinary man's development. What he does do exceedingly well is to present the Colonel in full feather: a man who came to the office in jodhpurs and accompanied by his favorite (often disagreeable) dogs and who, later in life, flew the 30 or so miles to work from his suburban estate because he could not bear the slowness of automobile traffic.

Robert Rutherford McCormick was born in 1880. Called "Bertie" by his parents, he was a second son, his brother Medill being not only the first-born but easily the favored. His father, a business failure though a very wealthy man, became a second-line diplomat who ended up a first-line dipsomaniac. His mother was a Medill. Her father, the publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, had also served as mayor of Chicago after the city's great fire of 1871. She herself was an exceptional social climber of great earnestness and powerful drive. She also had her disappointments. Kate Medill McCormick lost her second child, a daughter Katrina, before the infant reached her sixth month;

and, Richard Norton Smith informs us, "the grieving mother never got over the loss—or forgave her next child [our man Bertie] for being born male."

Bertie was educated in England, a big mistake both for him and, later, for the English. At Ludgrove, his public school, Bertie slept under an American flag and, in reaction to British chauvinism, became a youthful expert on the U.S. Constitution. Although he would later dress in English clothes, play polo, hunt foxes, and in nearly every outward way live most Anglophiliacally, he reserved the right to despise the English.

Returning to this country, Bertie was enrolled in 1894 in Groton. The only member of his class born, as Richard Norton Smith reports, west of the Hudson, he became rather jingoistically Midwestern and finished sixteenth out of nineteen boys. He seemed not much happier at Yale. There, "for the first and last time," Smith writes, he "made a conscious effort to be like everybody else." It did not take. He was not like anyone else, not then or ever; what Groton and Yale principally and finally accomplished was to set him permanently in opposition to all things admired in the Eastern United States.

By the time he completed his formal education, the chief contradictions in Bertie's character were established. He was a bashful narcissist, thumpingly egotistical yet deeply self-doubting. "By turns arrogant and shy, hearty and remote," Smith writes, "McCormick concealed his insecurities behind a gruffly formal exterior." All the wilder, then, to contemplate his running for political office, which he did upon his return to Chicago, actually winning the office of alderman on the Chicago City Council. He was sufficiently successful at the bread-and-butter work of an alderman, which consisted, then as now, of brokering favors for constituents, to be put up by the Republican party—founded by his maternal grandfather Joseph Medill and Stephen Douglas—for president of the Sanitary District. In this job, too, he performed well, cutting into the business-as-usual corruption of a rich Chicago fiefdom with a number of reform measures and even attempting to fight off the depredations of the utilities mogul Samuel Insull.

The young Bertie McCormick's politics were generally those of a conservative reformer. Amusingly, though perhaps not entirely charitably, Smith contends that "he held a libertarian distrust of any system or dogma that interfered with the pursuit of happiness on his terms." In any case, he was not cut out for the public life, at least insofar as it depend-

^{*} Houghton Mifflin, 597 pp., \$35.00.

ed on election to public office. For one thing, he was much more proficient at making enemies than friends; for another, he had the habit of showing up for Chicago City Council meetings in polo togs, not exactly the common touch; for a third, he had never much availed himself of that old politician's friend, cowardly caution. In 1910, he was defeated for reelection.

AT THE *Chicago Tribune*, the line of succession was immensely complex. The heir apparent was to be Bertie's brother Medill, who showed signs of serious mental instability (he was later thought to be a serious manic-depressive). Joseph Patterson, his mother's sister's son, was already well established at the editorial helm of the *Trib*. As Smith shows in careful detail, Bertie did not so much join as insinuate himself into the paper—until, through hard work, he reached the top, a position of absolute dominance. Later, in 1914, he and his cousin Joe would sign what has become known as “The Iron Bound Agreement,” in which they pledged loyalty to each other; the agreement lasted through Joseph Patterson's lengthy tenure as the main figure on the *New York Daily News*, which he founded in 1919.

The point to be underscored is that Colonel McCormick took what Smith calls “the paper of record among Chicagoans of high caste” and turned it into a hugely successful modern newspaper. It may not have been your or my father's idea of a good time, but the *Trib*, under the Colonel's masterminding, became an important, vibrant, international newspaper. He achieved this by furious hard work and impressive foresight, applied to all facets of the operation.

One of his great coups, for example, was hiring Max Annenberg (father of Walter); a serious tough guy himself, Annenberg, as head of circulation, was excellent at dealing with thugs who were attempting to sabotage delivery of the *Trib*. The Colonel also supplied readers with lots of special services, including a column devoted to holding public officials to their responsibilities, booklets on how to deflect the rising cost of living, cash prizes for solving mysteries. He acquired much timberland in Canada, useful for paper manufacture. He provided excellent employee benefits: bonuses and pensions, free medical care, lengthy vacations, and a set of silverware for all *Trib* workers who married. “Every member of the *Tribune*,” he once said, “is a member of my family.”

All this, of course, came at a price. The price was the Colonel's leadership. The old boy was hands-on, with a vengeance. Endlessly he plied his editors with ideas for stories, half of them a little balmy. If you

worked for the Colonel, by and large you did the Colonel's bidding. Some editors and foreign correspondents might have helped inform him on one subject or another, but finally it had to be understood that the *Trib* was the bugle through which blew only the opinions of Robert Rutherford McCormick.

These opinions, as garnered by Richard Norton Smith, turn out to have been rather more varied, odd, and idiosyncratic than one might have thought. The *Trib* was anti-Woodrow Wilson; also anti-Henry Ford. The Colonel early predicted that Gandhi's campaign of civil disobedience would lead to independence for India. He was against all involvement of the United States in foreign wars after World War I, yet he was for military preparedness. He hated taxation and any sign of the spread of the federal government. He disliked Herbert Hoover (“The man won't do”), and in 1932 attempted to get the Republican party to replace him with Calvin Coolidge as a candidate against FDR. He viewed the Pulitzer Prizes as a “mutual admiration society,” and hence not to be taken seriously. He thought architects were insane. Like the rest of us in the great opinion league, on an average day the Colonel batted about .300.

THE PROBLEM is that he so emphatically blew it in the clutch. His Anglophobia blinded him to anything remotely resembling reality in World War II, which he saw, in Smith's words, “as a clash of armies rather than ideologies.” In fact, as Smith relates, the Colonel knew better: Sigrid Schultz, his excellent correspondent in Germany, was supplying him with splendidly precise information about the viciousness of Nazism. But McCormick preferred to believe that not Nazism but British imperialism was the real threat. His anti-British feeling, of course, nicely dovetailed with his isolationism, which also took him off the hook on the question of the Jews. When apprised of what was happening under Hitler, he replied, “I feel . . . a very great sense of duty to protect the Jews in this country, but not abroad.”

The fact that Franklin Delano Roosevelt represented the pro-war faction in the country really pulled the steel hatch down over the Colonel's views. If FDR had come out for oxygen, McCormick would have ordered an editorial against it. When Alf Landon ran against FDR in 1936, the *Trib* published a cartoon showing the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and Roosevelt.

Colonel McCormick's line on World War II is said to have cost him 100,000 readers, the *Tribune*'s circulation dropping further when Marshall Field began a rival newspaper, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, after

the war. But my guess is that McCormick did not care all that much. Not only did he still have all the ads, he really was a man of principle, albeit too often the wrong one.

As he got older, McCormick only got dopier. He supported Senator Joseph McCarthy all the way. Naturally, he backed General Douglas MacArthur over Truman in Korea. He came to believe in the notion of a secret cabal running the United States government and answerable to Felix Frankfurter. Far from abating, his Anglophobia led him to the belief that Rhodes scholars returned to America to form a fifth column. Nor did his distaste for the Eastern United States cool; in *The Second City*, his book on Chicago, A.J. Liebling remarks that for the Colonel, the British empire “begins at the Hudson River.”

The Colonel died, of a weakened heart and a shot liver, in 1955 at the age of seventy-five, a wild old boy but absolutely his own man right up to the end. He was buried in an oversized coffin.

LATE IN his lengthy biography, Richard Norton Smith writes that “the tragedy of Franklin Roosevelt was that he died too soon; the tragedy of Robert McCormick was that he lived too long.” Wrong-headed, outrageous, megalomaniacal: why, then, does the Colonel, with a wedge of time placed between his day and ours, seem in many ways an oddly admirable figure? According to Smith, “McCormick was the last publisher to pursue duty at the sacrifice of profit.” John Bartlow Martin, a fine journalist of the day and a liberal, said of him, “He knows what he believes and is willing to go to hell for it.” And Katharine Graham, for many years the publisher of the *Washington Post*, is quoted in *The Colonel* as saying that “with all his strangeness, [McCormick] really did have integrity and professionalism of his own kind.”

Mrs. Graham herself has had a very good press in our day as something close to the apotheosis of the modern newspaper publisher. Her fame is traceable in large part to the *Post*'s relentless exposé of the 1974 break-in at Democratic headquarters at the Watergate, an event which in the fullness of time led triumphantly to the resignation of Richard Nixon as President of the United States. Her reputation for “integrity and professionalism” has gotten an even bigger boost from her recent memoirs, *Personal History*,* which have won near-universal acclaim from the reviewers, some of it bordering on the ecstatic. Yet as these memoirs make plain, the contrast between Mrs. Graham and Colonel McCormick could not be starker.

Not that one gross similarity—namely, inherited wealth—is lacking. An earlier biography of Colonel McCormick bore the title *Poor Little Rich Boy*; with the appropriate change of gender, the sobriquet fits Mrs. Graham even more snugly. It is an old story, the one she tells. Her father, Eugene Meyer, was one of those young men who had the very sensible notion of accumulating \$60 million or so before reaching the age of forty. Her mother, Agnes Ernst Meyer, was a woman with artistic interests, political and social ambitions, and the instincts of an intellectual lion-hunter (at the level of John Dewey, Constantin Brancusi, Albert Einstein, and Thomas Mann). But, as Mrs. Graham makes her case, she herself was greatly shorted as a child in the supply of mother-love.

Her father was Jewish, her mother not. Judaism—or Jewishness, for that matter—had little to do with her upbringing (or with the way she would raise her own children). Being Jewish loomed only as a social fact, in the guise of that miserable hag, Auntie Semitism, a disease of which her mother, who was born a Lutheran, may even have been a carrier. But in any event Jewishness, like sex and money, was not a subject of discussion in the Meyer household.

The family moved to Washington when Katharine was four years old. Her father, high- and civic-minded, was given serious appointments and assignments by seven different U.S. Presidents. Despite her mother's coldness, she felt closer to her mother than to her father, whose considerable dignity brought a natural distancing (though she later reports sensing his support in her own efforts to have a career). Her entire childhood, she claims, was one in which she could never feel confident about herself or anything she did.

KATHARINE MEYER began college at Vassar, then transferred to the University of Chicago, lured by the excitement of Robert Maynard Hutchins and his Great Books program. There she got a taste of youthful 30's radicalism, though she never joined the Communist party. Her father, who had bought the *Washington Post* in 1933, next arranged a job for her as a reporter on the *San Francisco News*; after that, she wrote editorials on lightish subjects for the *Post*. Then in Washington she met a young Harvard Law School graduate, a protégé of Felix Frankfurter named Philip Graham, whom, in 1940, she married; the service was conducted by “a very nice, low-key Lutheran min-

* Knopf, 642 pp., \$29.95.

ister" and photographed by Edward Steichen. Her social circle as a young wife included Joseph Alsop, David Bruce, Joseph Rauh, Jessica Mitford, and Jean Monnet: a fairly fast track.

To hear her tell it, though, in the perennially bright weather of the young, the rich, and the clever, she always felt herself slower than the rest of the field. Her husband in particular made her feel backward, and socially inept. "Gradually," she writes, "I became the drudge . . . and I became increasingly unsure of myself." And: "I was growing shyer and less confident as I grew older."

Philip Graham was a classical self-starter. His father-in-law felt so confident of Philip's abilities that he put him in charge of the *Washington Post* in his early thirties. He had little trouble making decisions, and he made many brilliant ones that would later pay off handsomely for the corporation, including buying television stations early in the game and acquiring *Newsweek*. Although the *Post's* official policy was not to endorse presidential candidates, Phil Graham was in the inner circle of Democratic-party politics. He is said to have been the man who pushed Senator Estes Kefauver to get the investigations of organized crime under way. Unfitting as it may seem for a publisher to do so, he wrote speeches during the Kennedy administration for the President and the Attorney General, as well as for Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson.

He was the love of Katharine Graham's life and its central tragedy. The tragedy was that Phil Graham was insane, apparently a manic-depressive, though never diagnosed as such till late in the day—wildly insulting on the one end, unable to get up from his bed on the other. Heavy boozing was part of his illness. At one point, he was prepared to leave his wife for a much younger woman, an Australian journalist. (Later Mrs. Graham would discover that there had been other women, too.) During an attempt at reconciliation, in 1963, he shot himself to death in one of the bathrooms of their country house.

Only with Philip Graham's death did Mrs. Graham become, including in her own estimation, a figure of significance. Pushing away outside offers to buy the *Post*, she took over as president of the company; eventually, she would serve as publisher, chief executive officer, and chairman. In her own account, hers was a story of education, of learning how to run a newspaper, a powerful corporation, a life lived in the glare of publicity.

Personal History is thus a fairly accurate title for Mrs. Graham's memoir, for it is in some ways less about the institution of the *Washington Post*

than about the psychological development of the woman who came to run it and help make it an enormous commercial success. Yet it is also a curiously blind book. Although Katharine Graham was the beneficiary of a generous inheritance, on the evidence of these more than 600 pages she did not, I fear, inherit a terribly interesting mind. What she does exhibit is a representative mind; her book provides a useful portrait of a contemporary American type in what I suppose academics of another time will call the age of liberal intellectual hegemony.

One quality that marks Mrs. Graham as a product of liberal culture is her language, which frequently—usually at crucial points—lapses into a modified psychobabble. Attempting to account in her last pages for why she has not remarried, she notes that "I enjoy being around married people who really love each other, are constantly polite and caring about each other, and between whom you feel a real and supportive relationship." The *Post's* role in defying the government and (together with the *New York Times*) publishing the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam war is characterized as "another extraordinary learning experience for me." Returning to life outside the Washington Post Company, she writes: "Perhaps with lessons learned from the women's movement, I began to have a happier time in my private life."

Another sign of conformity to the approved spirit of the day lies in Mrs. Graham's insistence on her own victimhood. For this multimillionaire's daughter and head of a Fortune-500 company, a woman once listed by *U.S. News & World Report* as the seventeenth most powerful person in the United States, what counts most is that she was not sufficiently encouraged by her parents and was then further suppressed by a brilliant, ebullient husband, with the patriarchal *ancien régime* left to finish the job.

Is it necessary to note, for the record, that Katharine Graham is hardly the pussycat she suggests she is or was? Just as she uses this book to establish her own virtue, so she uses it to settle a number of old scores with anyone who she feels has condescended to her, betrayed her, or in any serious way let her down. Despite all her talk of bad nerves and shaken confidence, she is one tough character.

The final mark of Mrs. Graham's conformism lies in her politics, which are best described as soft liberal, and, more important, in the way her politics were or were not reflected in the paper. Philip Graham had not been above using the *Post* to further his own views; this he did by suppressing certain stories, playing others in klieg lights. But Mrs. Graham,

once in power, saw her function much differently. Although she seems to have had no difficulty thinking of herself as the boss in a business sense, as the publisher she says she tended to regard her role less as an opinion-setter than as a person in the middle, “the go-between between complainers, supplicants, and others of all kinds on the one hand and editors at the *Post* or *Newsweek* on the other. The editors,” she adds, “are more often right than wrong. . . .”

Depends, I should say, on who the editors happen to be. Mrs. Graham’s first important move was to appoint Ben Bradlee as editor of the *Post*. Though Bradlee’s chief ambition was to edit a paper that had prestige equal to that of the *New York Times*, it was also Ben Bradlee who brought on Philip Geyelin to run the *Post*’s editorial page, and it was Geyelin who turned the paper around on Vietnam, transforming it from an institution generally supporting administration policy to one sharply critical or antagonistic. This prompted President Lyndon Johnson, who had been a favorite of Phil Graham’s, to exclaim in exasperation: “Well, by God, if I owned a goddamn newspaper, I ought to have some people around me who are going to do what I want.”

But, as Katharine Graham tells it, Johnson missed the point:

What the President never accepted, or even clearly understood—as most people don’t understand—is the autonomy editors have, and must have, to produce a good newspaper. I used to describe it as liberty, not license.

Later, during Watergate, Mrs. Graham would write to Richard Nixon’s staff assistant, John Ehrlichman: “What appears in the *Post* is not a reflection of my personal feelings.”

Can this be true? It both is and is not. Take Watergate. “Watergate no doubt was the most important occurrence in my working life,” Mrs. Graham writes, “but my involvement was basically peripheral, rarely direct.” She says she was in “constant conversation” with Ben Bradlee and Howard Simons, the editors in charge of the *Post*’s news coverage, as well as with Philip Geyelin and Meg Greenfield, the two main editorial writers on the subject. But she also kept her distance, and even now she claims not to know the identity of “Deep Throat,” the paper’s chief informant. She summarizes her role thus: “What I did primarily was stand behind the editors and reporters, in whom I believed.”

Another way of putting this is to say that she chose not to call off the dogs.

THE OLD story about newspapers used to be that publishers ruled them with an iron hand in an iron glove. They, the publishers, were the true molders of opinion. The editors and reporters were their mere minions, anticipating and carrying out their ideas and orders, boozing it up afterward.

Something of the sort could be said of Colonel McCormick. Lots of interesting men worked for the *Chicago Tribune*—Charlie MacArthur, Ring Lardner, Vincent Sheehan, William L. Shirer. They were not the Colonel’s minions, but neither did they seem ever to have laid a glove on him in the realm of influence. McCormick fired Vincent Sheehan, pronouncing him “a liar, disloyal and dishonorable.” When he hired Shirer to head his Vienna bureau, he instructed him: “Don’t fall for all these Communists and socialists. And don’t let all the counts and countesses take you in.” Eventually, he fired him, too.

Katharine Graham, by contrast, seems to have been everywhere subject to influence. All the strong stands she took, she seems to have been led to, willingly enough, under the guidance of others. Mrs. Graham may thus be a perfect illustration of H. L. Mencken’s notion that publishers do not educate their editors and reporters, but rather are educated by them. For where else are publishers likely to get their ideas, Mencken asked, if not from reading their own newspapers? True enough, but considering the case of Katharine Graham, one might add that there are, surely, better places to go to school.

But is there really all that much to choose between a publisher like Colonel McCormick, a man of odd courage and great flair who, led by his obsessions, proved wrong half the time, and mostly on the critical issues; and a publisher like Mrs. Graham, educated by and finally in thrall to employees whose own morality, in the end, was not much more subtle than the Colonel’s (“Goddamn Roosevelt” in his case, “Goddamn Nixon” in theirs)? Jefferson famously said that, “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” What is there about the present time that tends to make one wonder, if only for a brief moment, whether we would not be better off without either?