

An Intellectual Publisher or a Successful Huckster?

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"The Eisenhower years have been years of flabbiness and self satisfaction and gross materialism The loudest sound has been the oink and grunt of private hoggishness. . . . It has been the age of the slob."

William Shannon, *New York Times* writer quoted by Richard Rovere in *The American Scholar*, Spring, 1962

"[W]e've grown unbelievably prosperous and we meander along in a heavy, humorless, sanctimonious stultifying atmosphere, singularly lacking in the self-mockery that is self criticism. Probably the climate of the late 50s was the dullest and dreariest in all our history."

Eric Goldman, historian, in "Goodbye to the Fifties and Good Riddance," *Harpers Magazine*, January 1960

"The eight Eisenhower years were great years for the Republic. . . . Largely by their own efforts, individually or involuntary association the American people made giant strides in nearly every field of endeavor under the benign laws of the Republic."

Quoted by Alan Brinkley from an unpublished Luce Memoir in his biography *Henry Luce and his American Century* New York, 2010

IF ONE TAKES THE CLAIMS of this biography seriously much of the credit for changing public opinion may well go to Britt Hadden and Henry Luce, the creators of *Time*: *Time* the Weekly News Magazine and subsequently *Time* Incorporated embracing *Fortune*, *Life*, and *Sports Illustrated*.

The first issue of *Time* appeared on March 3, 1923 published and edited by two young Yale graduates with little experience and no substantial financial backing.

Henry Luce was the child of a Presbyterian missionary to China . He was born in China and arrived in the United States when he was twelve to attend the highly regarded Hotchkiss School in Connecticut. Britt Hadden was the son of a wealthy president of a Brooklyn savings bank. They became close friends. Both were obsessive strivers and big men on campus. Luce was the more serious scholar but Hadden's colorful personality made him a great favorite among his fellow students. Though good friends, they were fierce competitors. But Luce usually came in a close second to Hadden. Luce was defensive about the poverty of his missionary father and he stood in awe of Hadden's privileged upbringing, social sophistication and ability to make friends. Luce felt himself to be an outsider. At Yale they continued their competitive friendship, both served on the *Yale Record*, although Hadden became its editor, beating out Luce. Luce wrote for several other college publications and earned a Phi Beta Kappa key. While Hadden was at best a mediocre student, he was chosen by his class as "most likely to succeed " and having "given the most to Yale." Both were obsessed to be chosen for the Senior Society, Skull and Bones. When Luce made it after some fearful waiting he felt that he was now a member of the "most exclusive society in the world." Hadden took his selection for granted.

By 1918 Hadden and Luce were pleased by America's entrance into World War I. They served in the Yale Reserve Officers Training Core and for a brief period were sent to a training camp in South Carolina. There they informed the uneducated hillbilly soldiers what the issues were and the obligation the United States had to save the world for democracy.

After their graduation a friend from Yale got them jobs at the *Baltimore News*. It was here that first plans to start a weekly were discussed. They would devise a magazine that condensed stories from a variety of newspapers and magazines covering all aspects of contemporary culture, news, foreign affairs, politics, sports, the arts, theatre, and human interest. A reader of the entire magazine would be able to hold his or her own at any cocktail party or dinner, so long as one did not probe the depths of a subject. Both Luce and Hadden did not think it possible to underestimate the knowledge of the average American. Their magazine would be dedicated to informing and entertaining a middle class audience. It is generally accepted that the uniqueness of the idea, the title, *Time*, and the colorful language and word creation were all the product of Hadden's risk-taking imagination. Brinkley suggests that Luce knew from the start that he was the junior partner of any collaboration with Hadden. Luce's talent lay in his business acumen. Hadden would be the editor and Luce the business manager. They planned to periodically switch positions but it was clear that Hadden was not cut out to manage affairs so it fell to Luce to become the business manager.

The difference between the two men was vividly described by Dwight Macdonald, an early associate at *Time*:

Luce/Hadden: moral/amoral, pious/wordly, respectable/raffish, bourgeois/bohemian, introvert/extrovert, somber/convivial, reliable/unpredictable. Slow/quick, dog/cat, tame/wild, efficient/brilliant, decent/charming, Puritanical/hedonistic, Naïve/cynical, Victorian/18th century.

The author is clearly more appreciative of the practical and necessary talents that Luce brought to management than he is of the often reckless conduct of Brit Hadden. Not long after the magazine showed real promise of becoming a great success, Hadden became bored with the operation and gave more time to drinking, chasing women, and pursuing a lively, carousing night life.

Luce, on the other hand, had an enormous belief in appearances and a respect and admiration for the lives of the wealthy and powerful. Social associations were important to him although he felt uncomfortable and awkward. Luce, during his courtship of the socialite Liz Hotz, was taken with the parties, balls, dinners and Lake Forest social scene. As the son of poor missionaries in China he did not have the wherewithal to keep up but received considerable help from Nettie Fowler McCormick, the widow of Cyrus McCormick of the great farm machinery company. The two upstarts did manage to raise \$100,000 to begin the venture. By mid-1924 after a shaky beginning, the publication was definitely catching on and by the end of the year was making a profit. Three years later Hadden bragged that *Time* was a "successful established institution" noted both for its disciplined brevity and unique and entertaining style. Hadden proved to be a world class word-smith. He was credited for using the *Iliad* as a model in developing such compound adjectives as "flabby chinned," "snaggle-toothed," "coffee-colored," "bandy-legged," and "trim-figured." While ridiculing an Alabama Senator, Tom Heflin, Hadden created the verb to "heffle" which he defined as "to talk loud and long without saying much." The magazine was well received and viewed as lively, witty and entertaining. Brinkley notes that despite some obvious failures and weaknesses "it was consistent and homogeneous. It presented readers with a familiar and predictable experience." The editors bragged about their "cover-to-cover readers."

Brinkley makes much of this phenomenal achievement and for the most part credits Luce. As Hadden spent less time at the office, Luce actually took over the editorship. Their close friendship gradually fell apart and by 1928, five years after the founding, Hadden was on his death bed. In addition to poor health from alcoholism he was diagnosed as suffering from *Streptococcus veridans* that led to severe blood poisoning from which he failed to recover. Luce visited every day and despite Hadden's weakened condition kept insisting that they launch a new business magazine. Hadden was contemptuous. He had little use for businessmen and corporate America in general. Luce's grand venture of an oversized glossy format printed on cream-colored pages appalled Hadden, who described it as "high class Babbitry." He had been devoted to turning *Tide*, a house organ to solicit advertising into a general magazine dealing with advertising. *Tide*, as developed by Hadden, deliberately ridiculed some of the advertisers in *Time*. He was dedicated to exposing and ridiculing the culture of consumption and the absence of any ethical standards that allowed companies to promote shoddy goods and lie about their products. Luce hated Hadden's cynicism and quickly ended the magazine in 1930.

What took place during those last bedside discussions is not clear except to say that in a handwritten will Hadden insisted that his share of the stocks in Time Inc. remain in his family. Luce needed to purchase them in order to have controlling ownership of the company by giving him unlimited power to shape its future. He used that power immediately to launch *Fortune*. There is a much more incriminating account of Luce's response to Hadden's death and his subsequent purchase of the controlling stock in Isaiah Wilner's, *The Man Time Forgot: A Tale of Genius, Betrayal, and the Creation of Time Magazine*. Wilner makes much of the fact that despite an effort by Hadden's cousin and a *Time* editor, John S. Martin, to have a major obituary in the magazine it was nixed by Luce and the editors. Only a brief notice appeared. Brinkley views Martin's pleas as an "overwrought effort" and significantly ends the chapter with the notice that Hadden's name was removed from the masthead.

Brinkley speculates on several scenarios if Hadden had lived. He concludes that the history of the company would have been profoundly different but that Hadden's "raffish Mencken-like outlook ...represented the disillusioned, skeptical, flippant culture of the 'Jazz Age'" which was passing and that Luce on the other hand was the "serious, earnest questing exception to his generation's style; and his sense of purpose, even of mission may have been better suited to the more sober 1930's than Hadden's ironic temperament . . . "

Brinkley then launches into the phenomenally successful creation of *Fortune* which Hadden had so ferociously opposed. This was followed later by *Life*, the equally successful picture magazine. All of this clearly proved that Luce did not need Hadden. He performed brilliantly as the sole editor-in-chief. He notes that Luce "rarely spoke of Hadden" and that over time fewer and fewer people had ever heard of him. Brinkley states that Luce saw "nothing to gain from dwelling on his former dependence on his longtime friend." The outrage of Hadden's mother is not mentioned.

Throughout the biography, Luce's intellectuality is repeatedly stressed. He had been precociously intelligent in his school days. He was always preoccupied with ideas. He was, despite bias and dogmatism, an "intellectual omnivore." He "devoured ideas" from many sources and sought out "interesting thinkers' on issue after issue." All were amazed at his intellectual curiosity, but, as one editor noted, he didn't "believe anybody could tell him anything" and that he had no one to talk to on his intellectual level. In later life Brinkley reports that he developed "intellectual relationships" with [such] major theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr, Henry Sloane Coffin, Henry Van Deusen, and Paul Tillich. Little light is shed on those conversations. It was the evangelical, Billy Graham, that Luce loved for his "old fashioned religion and his "extremely conservative politics."

Luce, Brinkley reports, had no use for small talk and repeatedly insisted that he had no

intellectual equals. Clair Booth Luce, his second partner in a disastrous marriage, recalled that he "could think of no one who was his intellectual superior." When she suggested Einstein he dismissed him as a man who borrowed the ideas of others without crediting their work. Unfortunately few of these ideas or issues is ever discussed. The books he read are seldom cited. At my count only two, a biography of President McKinley and a rather strange and oblique reference to Lionel Trilling's critical study of Matthew Arnold are mentioned. But there is no discussion here of his opinions concerning Arnold's focus on Culture and Anarchy. At one point he did discuss the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in a letter to his son Peter. Again there is no development of the discussion.

Brinkley repeatedly stresses the amazing success Luce had with his publishing ventures. One example was his ability to recruit famous writers and significant leaders to write for his magazines. The list of important literary figures that initially contributed to *Fortune* is astonishing: James Agee, Dwight Macdonald, John Hersey, Robert Fitzgerald, Robert Cantwell and John Kenneth Galbraith. Later many of the left leaning writers quit, angered by his increasingly right wing positions. He often pandered to celebrities and leaders to get them to write for him. They did so for the tremendous circulation insured. Alfred Kazin recalls Luce's "taste for Big Ideas and Big Thinkers" and it was through them and his publications that he would inform the world.

Surely one cannot dismiss his achievements in the world of publishing. As Brinkley notes, "in his own time he was among the most powerful media figures in America and perhaps the world." His leftist critics did not simply disdain Luce they feared him as the head of a powerful propaganda machine capable of narrowing the horizons of readers while at the same time manipulating and mobilizing them. They believed that the "easily deluded middle class could easily fall under the influence of a powerful and persuasive media."

What is one then to make of this record of dubious opinions held by an allegedly powerful intellect. The last Democrat Luce supported was Al Smith largely because of his strong religious faith. No other Democratic president or aspirant received the support of Luce publications. He found Kennedy attractive and pandered to him, but the magazines supported Nixon in 1960. Luce had little use for FDR and was early on an opponent of the New Deal . His left leaning writers' enthusiasm for the administration angered him. He was determined to get *Fortune* "straightened out ideologically." His critics charged that he had turned *Fortune* into an organ of conservative political propaganda.

Always fascinated with "Great Men," Luce treated Mussolini and even Hitler with some admiration and respect in the 1930s and *Time* treated Hitler and the Nuremberg rallies as great spectacles managed by a great man. Joshua Billings, one of his most astute editors, remarked that even as an older man Luce maintained his "boyish susceptibility to Greatness."

With *Life*, the picture magazine accompanying *Time* the Luce publications maintained a sentimental and Pollyannaish vision of America. Brinkley is aware and seemingly tolerant of the "amiable positiveness" of the Luce vision. He writes that in "an era blighted by Depression, prejudice, social turmoil, and the shadow of war, *Life* offered the comforting image of a nation united behind a shared, if contrived, vision of the American Dream." Even when the devastating pictures of poverty by Margaret Bourke White were available, *Life* did not use them and when James Agee and Walker Evans chronicled the lives of Southern share-croppers on assignment from *Fortune* the editors declined to publish the pictures or Agee's difficult text. From the very first issue of *Life* there was an affirmative celebratory view of Americans happily pursuing the American dream. When the magazine pictured the workers at the great Fort Peck Dam in Montana, the shabby squalor of their miserable shanty town was muted and the residents photographed "in restaurants and bars, laughing drinking and flirting" in happy satisfaction. All of this is recorded by Brinkley but he appears to appreciate Luce's affirmative challenge to the inevitable grim realities stressed by leftist critics.

Luce, Brinkley insists, was never a racist and gave constant support to civil rights but he often spoke of African-Americans and Jews in the most blatant of stereotypes. As Brinkley apologetically explains, he occasionally fell into the "casual bigotry of the upper class" of his time, referring to the "the Jewboy doctor who lived in a "swank Jew apartment on Riverside."

With the approach of war, the Luce publications thrived in an atmosphere of patriotic unity. Luce supported Wendell Wilkie with wild enthusiasm in the election of 1940 much to the chagrin of some of his editors. On February 17, 1941 Luce published in *Life* "The American Century." Brinkley sees it as "the most influential article he would ever publish." It simply stated that America had the greatest power and the greatest commitment to democratic values and it should devote all of its power and technological know-how to spreading these values throughout the world. It implicitly wanted an immediate declaration of war against Germany. The response to his essay was tremendous. While many agreed, others still demanding peace saw Luce as a propagandist war monger. Many on the left saw the statement as an imperialist manifesto demanding American world wide domination. Norman Thomas criticized Luce's "nakedness of imperial ambition." Brinkley argues that the message of the essay "could not accurately be described as imperialism." This statement is followed by a "But" used constantly to mitigate previous statements. In this case Brinkley concedes "that the U. S. mission in the world did indeed profoundly change the shape of the nation and the globe." John Lukacs, the erudite conservative historian, sees Luce as a perfect example of evangelical imperialism. While influential it was hardly original, much of it taken from Walter Lippman and Archibald McLeish. The title echoed a phrase used decades earlier by H.G. Wells.

Following the "American Century" article with the coming of the war, Luce launched into his save China from totalitarianism campaign through the good offices of Chiang Kai-shek and his wife. Together they would bring great modernization to China. He ignored all charges of widespread corruption among the Nationalists. He would listen to no one who was skeptical concerning Chiang and insisted that the war be expanded into China. He was outraged at the refusal of both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations for not coming to the aid militarily of the Chinese nationalists. When his own reporter, Teddy White, refused to knuckle under and continued to attack the Generalissimo, he was fired.

Brinkley notes that Luce's hopes for the post-war world were largely incoherent. In his view the State Department had betrayed China and he used all of the right wing rhetoric about losing that vast country. When the Korean War came he hoped it would lead to a war with China and was outraged at Truman's dismissal of that great man, General Douglas MacArthur.

All through the fifties he waged an obsessive war against Communism. He denounced Paul Robeson and attacked his editors for not stressing his "traitorous attitude toward the U.S." There is no discussion of the government's treatment of the actor and activist. He charged State Department staffers such as John Carter Vincent and Owen Lattimore with responsibility for the sellout of China. Brinkley has a "but." He claims Luce's attitude toward Communist subversion was more "nuanced" than many of the hard core anti-Communists. His supporting evidence is Luce's contempt for Senator Joe McCarthy. True, but he opposed McCarthy because his reckless accusations gave the good cause of anti-Communism a bad name. Brinkley goes on to argue that Luce's "broader interest in Communist ideas. . . was an intellectual one" and he spent most of his time repudiating liberal anti Communism and favoring his own Cold War brand. His model was Sidney Hook. Luce's attacks on Dean Acheson and General George Marshall were hardly nuanced. Acheson was seen as a "symbol of error and disaster" and he charged Truman and Marshall with "endangering the future of humanity by their incompetence."

He continued to give speeches that were, according to Brinkley, "fumbling and unintelligible," demanding a more aggressive foreign policy. When the Vietnam War broke out he had great hopes

that it might expand to China.

Luce wrote the introduction to a tedious book on the need for national goals which was denounced as having little substance. Brinkley agreed with that judgment.

In conclusion, after this dreary record of a man allegedly devoted to intellectual discussion and ideas, Brinkley concludes that Luce's power was controlling public opinion but in fact he was unable to exercise as much power as he wished. He detested and opposed F. D. R. but his criticism had very little impact on Roosevelt's policies. He railed for years about the failure to support Chiang and nationalist China but never overcame America's unwillingness to challenge the Communist regime. Although he had close relationships with Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, rarely did they take his advice. The Luce publications, Brinkley states, were "reflections of the middle-class world, not often a shaper of it." He did not change the world but he played an important role in the creation of new forms of "information and communication." His magazines were "always the most important of his achievements." The editors insisted that Luce share the credit for that achievement. After Luce died in 1967, Briton Hadden's name was restored to the *Time* masthead.

I closed this volume unclear as to why Henry Luce deserved such a massive and largely generous biography. Just what great service did the Luce publications provide other than an early version of the sound bite culture we have grown to accept?