

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### “Chicagoland” chronicler

by [Philip Terzian](#)

Review of *The Colonel: The Life & Legend of Robert B. McCormick, 1880-1955*, by Richard Norton Smith

If the name of Robert R. McCormick does not exactly resonate these days, there's a good reason for it: he was a newspaper proprietor and, by contemporary standards, very much on the wrong side of history's street. A benevolent autocrat, whose views were reflected in the pages of his product, the *Chicago Tribune*, he was an isolationist in the middle of the American Century, implacable enemy of the burgeoning welfare state, and a “character” inhabiting the corporate world, who wielded power and exerted much influence. And yet, outside his Midwestern domain, he is now largely forgotten and, if remembered, much misunderstood.

Let this be a lesson to all journalists with pretensions. Across the Potomac River from Washington, another eccentric newspaper proprietor, Allen Neuharth, has just opened a museum—with the ghastly, if inevitable, name of Newseum—which seeks to attach some form of immortality to reporters and editors. This is, to say the least, an exercise in futility. For even in the midst of its wide-screen exhibits and flashy memorabilia, the Newseum subsists on the subject of the news, not the nature of the product, or the people who print and broadcast information.

In literature, journalists may be counted on the fingers of a single, dismembered hand; in history, journalists barely register at all. They are famous, sometimes notorious, in their day; but with very few exceptions, once time marches on and the newsprint turns yellow, their monuments are covered, like Ozymandias's, by lone and level sands.

In Colonel McCormick's case, that is too bad; for he was, by any measure, one of the great personalities of modern American history and, in his day, a player of some importance in the national drama. He was also, for what it is worth, a publisher of genius, a shrewd capitalist with impeccable judgment about news and a visionary sense of the business of journalism. In this judicious and entertaining volume, Richard Norton Smith has rescued McCormick from undeserved obscurity, and answered the biographer's two basic questions: what was the subject like, and why should we profit from reading about him? [\[1\]](#)

Robert Rutherford McCormick was the grandson of Joseph Medill, a founder of the Republican party, friend of Lincoln, and Gilded Age investor. Medill's interest in the *Chicago Tribune* descended through two daughters, Katharine McCormick and Elinor Patterson, and devolved upon a quartet of bright, tormented grandchildren: Robert McCormick, known as Bertie to his family; his brother Medill, later a U.S. senator and suicide; Joseph Patterson, co-founder of the *New York Daily News*, America's first tabloid; and Eleanor (Cissy) Patterson, publisher of the *Washington Times-Herald*, and famous femme fatale.

Of the four, the least was expected of Bertie, a younger brother much abused by his malignant mother, and ignored by his syphilitic diplomat father. And yet it was Bertie who made the most of his birthright, and whose name endures at all in our time.

Like many ambitious people in history, Robert McCormick was a lonely, sensitive lad who grew up to become a very complicated adult. Easily wounded by criticism, he nursed grievances, disguised his emotions, craved maternal love, and constructed for himself an insouciant manner and eccentric disposition. Much is made, in this book and elsewhere, of McCormick's public rivalry with his prep-school classmate and nemesis, Franklin Roosevelt, whose New Deal politics and global ambitions represented nearly everything McCormick abhorred.

Yet while their public philosophies were different, their personal similarities are striking. The sons of awesome mothers, haunted by failure, both saw themselves as lords of the manor, adopting the habits of the English squirearchy: Roosevelt in the White House, and McCormick from atop the famous Tribune Tower. FDR hid behind a mask of good cheer, pince-nez, cape, and cigarette holder, and fancied himself a naval strategist. Bertie McCormick was a gallant gentleman-artillerist in World War I, a fox-hunting gent with a clipped silver mustache, stentorian voice, and chilly exterior. Both excelled as radio performers, endured disastrous marriages, and found meaning in their lives by acquiring power.

Both succeeded, of course, and against great odds. In Roosevelt's case, the obstacle was physical; for McCormick it was—well, not exactly mental, but certainly emotional. Insanity lurked in the McCormick family, and the hopes of the Colonel's mother were fastened on the prospects of her elder son, Medill. Bertie was shipped off to a series of schools, first in England, then at Groton, and finally Yale, to none of which he ever felt a semblance of allegiance. He returned to Chicago to pursue a career of patrician civic-mindedness, first as president of the city's Sanitary District, and then as a reformist Republican alderman.

Then came the Great War. While his brother Medill combined a political career with bouts of madness, McCormick and his cousin Joseph Patterson, with whom he had jointly managed the *Tribune*, sailed off to Europe, first as correspondents, then as soldiers, and returned well-prepared to exploit their inheritance. After the Armistice, Captain Patterson decamped to the *New York Daily News*, their joint invention, and Colonel McCormick settled in at the *Tribune*.

It was a subject of speculation and droll humor in subsequent years, but McCormick's military title was fully earned. He had been commissioned in the Illinois National Guard, and fought bravely and successfully on the Western Front with the First Division. Indeed, he renamed his family home for a desperate battle in which he and his troops withstood a massive German attack (Cantigny), and when he died, he was buried in his faded khaki uniform.

As a human being, the Colonel is not so easily drawn; but Richard Norton Smith paints a vivid canvas, without delving too deep into psychoanalysis. McCormick was a mass of contradictory impulses. He cherished a lifelong interest in military matters; but after his own service was finished in 1918, he resolutely opposed American action, except in defense of the homeland. He was an imperious, at times capricious, employer, capable of extraordinary rudeness and generosity. He was, at once, comically self-important and self-deprecating. Never happier than when riding to hounds, he championed, indeed romanticized, the American yeoman, and bemoaned the snobbery and decadence of the rich. A stalwart advocate of what we would today call family values, he had the lifelong habit of pursuing married women.

A regular visitor to London, McCormick reviled British institutions, continually warning against perfidious Albion. His ambiguous attitude toward English civilization even took the form of a Shaw-like campaign for language reform: Americans spoke American, he declared, and the *Tribune*

was saddled with simplified spelling (grafic, biografy, buro) until McCormick's death. He enjoyed the benefits of a prototypical elite New England education, and yet detested and distrusted the East and its "alien" culture.

For McCormick, the heart of the republic had been created by the Northwest Ordinance, adopted two years before the Constitution, which barred slavery from new states north of the Ohio River and pushed the Anglo-American settlers westward. Here was situated McCormick's Arcadia, the hub of which he christened Chicagoland, and chronicled with vigilant, sometimes suffocating, passion in his self-proclaimed World's Greatest Newspaper.

In the history of journalism, McCormick is, by present-day conventions, a problematic figure. He represents everything we are instructed to deplore in the ownership of newspapers. McCormick did not just calculate the growth and expansion of the *Tribune's* business empire, creating a behemoth which still prospers; he dominated its news and editorial columns as well. McCormick's opinions—his quirks, crusades, obsessions, and convictions—were not just well known because he was a prominent public figure; they were a daily feature of the *Tribune's* content, and writers and editors were expected to conform.

Since on most domestic and foreign issues McCormick was fighting a rear-guard action, his influence is now considered to be pernicious. Of course, this was not so obvious to the hundreds of thousands of people who purchased his newspaper, or shared his views, and found their voice in the dinosaur Colonel.

Which leads us to another matter: McCormick as publisher, politics aside. It is altogether too easy to deplore his kind of singular, arbitrary journalism: the personification of A. J. Liebling's famous notion that freedom of the press belongs to the man who owns one. But McCormick was a vigorous, unparalleled presence: The *Tribune's* tone was unmistakable, and its product was consistent. What is the name of his successor in Chicago, and what does the *Tribune* represent today? By contrast, the publisher of the nation's preeminent newspaper, *The New York Times*, is best known for his views on affirmative action in the newsroom. McCormick gave the *Tribune* a distinctive identity, and encouraged good writing and enduring innovations. He understood the stakes in policy disputes and recognized the bonds of merchant to customer: comic strips, sports scores, pertinent information.

McCormick's resistance to government intrusion—prior restraint, wartime censorship, Federal regulation—might have appeared retrograde in Roosevelt's time; but his lonely expeditions, and taste for subversion, may be read another way in the world of chain ownership, or the era of the Pentagon Papers and the Internet. Above all, he succeeded in a difficult balancing act: the *Tribune* was entertaining as well as authoritative, and McCormick had an evident gift for making money.

To be sure, in the long run, it doesn't add up to much. The Tribune Company is one of many large corporations, and the issues which the author so skillfully records--Illinois politics, civic corruption in the 1920s, the purchase of Canadian forests for paper, the printing of war plans on the eve of Pearl Harbor—grow less important with the passage of time. But that, after all, is the enduring story of journalism. The peculiar legacy of Col. Robert McCormick is that the empire he invented bears little resemblance to the kingdom he ruled: the missing element, of course, is the Colonel himself, and his animated, dexterous, autocratic hand. It is probably true, as the author suggests, that McCormick's day is past, not likely to return. It is equally true that progress, at times, leaves the world a little duller.

## Notes

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1. *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick, 1880–1955*, by Richard Norton Smith; Houghton Mifflin, 597 pages, \$35. [Go back to the text.](#)

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