

Review

Robert Vanderlan, *Intellectuals Incorporated. Politics, Art, and Ideas Inside Henry Luce's Media Empire*. Philadelphia / Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 372 p. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4271-3, € 42,99.

Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher. Henry Luce and His American Century*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. 531 p. ISBN: 978-0-679-41444-5, € 34,99.

In 1923 Henry Luce and Briton Hadden launched the first issue of *Time Magazine*. Two decades later Luce's Time Inc. media empire dominated the American news magazine market. *Time* sold over a million copies each week; *Life Magazine*, founded in 1936, was the single most widely read magazine in the country with a circulation of almost 4 million. *Fortune*, the third of the Luce magazines, was the leading business magazine in the country. Part of the secret of Luce's success was his ability to attract talented writers. As he once argued, 'it is easier to turn poets into business journalists than to turn bookkeepers into writers.' As a result, a remarkable roster of writers joined the Luce magazines in the 1920s and 1930s, including Archibald MacLeish, James Agee, Dwight Macdonald, William H. Whyte, Theodore White and John Hersey. Robert Vanderlan's excellent *Intellectuals Incorporated*

deals with these and other writers and the struggles they faced as cogs in the larger, market-oriented machine of Time Inc.

One aim of Vanderlan's book is to debunk the 'selling-out'-myth that has surrounded many of these writers. This myth dates back to the early years of the Cold War, when Luce's Time Inc. became less and less accommodating to liberal journalists. A number of novels and memoirs written at this time firmly put in place the image of a Faustian bargain made by writers who needed Time Inc.'s money and in return had to sell their integrity as intellectuals. Critics of mass culture described working for *Time* as 'a Verdun for the young'. Dwight Macdonald even felt obliged to write an essay on his years as a *Fortune* writer titled 'Selling Out' and joked: 'I kept falling asleep in the very act of prostitution.' *Intellectuals Incorporated* convincingly argues, however, that the 'selling-out'-myth is indeed largely a myth; and, more importantly, that it has obscured the real struggles and achievements of a talented group of intellectuals at Time Inc.

Vanderlan deftly weaves biographical sketches of what he calls 'interstitial intellectuals' into the larger narrative of the character and development of the Time Inc. magazines. One fascinating

chapter focuses on the early years of *Fortune*, Luce's second magazine founded just months after the Wall Street crash of October 1929. Led by managing editor Ralph MacAllister Ingersoll, the *Fortune* staff produced some of the most incisive writing of the decade on the Great Depression and American capitalism. Much of this writing, moreover, was highly critical of the kind of laissez-faire capitalism identified with President Coolidge's famous statement that the 'business of America is business.' MacLeish and Macdonald published a series of articles in *Fortune* supporting the need for New Deal-type reforms and exposing wrongdoings at big corporations such as U.S. Steel. Vanderlan argues convincingly that *Fortune* played an important role in 'legitimizing' FDR's reform agenda, thus paving the way for the second New Deal of 1935-1936.

Ironically, the difficult debate over how critical *Fortune* should be of American capitalism led to a distinct change of course in 1936. Luce decided not to publish a critical interpretive essay on the monopolistic tendencies of U.S. Steel written by Macdonald (and clearly inspired by Macdonald's interest in Marxist-Leninist theory). Not much later, Macdonald left the magazine and *Fortune's* overall tone became much more business-friendly. By 1940, Luce openly used his magazines to aid the campaign of the Republican presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie. In contrast to Macdonald, Archibald McLeish continued to write for the Luce magazines, arguing that reaching a large audience was more important than protecting one's ideological purity.

A weakness in Vanderlan's well-written and interesting study is the fact

that Luce himself remains very much a mystery to the reader. Tellingly, Luce is not even listed in the index. Readers interested in Luce and the inner workings of the Time Inc. magazines are therefore well advised to read *Intellectuals Incorporated* in conjunction with Alan Brinkley's *The Publisher. Henry Luce and His American Century*. Unlike Vanderlan, Brinkley did have access to the Time Inc. Archives, enabling him to shed more light on Luce's influence and motivations. The first part of Brinkley's highly readable work is particularly enlightening in explaining Luce's enormous drive and ambition. As the oldest son in a missionary family based in China, Luce was imbued with a strong sense of responsibility and higher purpose in life. At the same time, the limited financial means of the Luce family frequently put Harry (as Luce was usually called) in awkward positions. As a scholarship student at Hotchkiss, an elite boarding school in Connecticut, Harry was not allowed to sleep in the school dormitories and had to wait on the tables of the paying students. To compensate for this obvious lack in social standing, Luce was determined to excel as a scholar and writer and contributed hundreds of articles and poems to the school newspapers.

Brinkley explains Luce's increasingly dominant role in Time Inc. in the second half of the 1930s by pointing both to Luce's personality and to the developing world crisis. Luce came to regard himself by the mid-1930s as one of America's 'great men', who had to shape the future course of the country. In terms of the U.S. economy, this meant safeguarding the system of free enterprise and opportunity as Luce understood it. In terms of world affairs, this meant a clear shift away

from isolationism towards an active and responsible American foreign policy. It was in this context that Luce penned his most famous article, introducing *Life* readers to his vision of an American Century in the summer of 1941. By the early 1950s, Luce's more and more conservative views on both domestic and foreign affairs strongly influenced his magazines, thus making Time Inc. a less hospitable place for liberal journalists. Not surpris-

singly, this was exactly the moment the 'selling-out'-myth first saw the light.

Vanderlan's and Brinkley's books are highly recommended for anyone interested in the Time Inc. media empire as well as for a wider audience interested in American society and politics in the middle decades of the 20th century.

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