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A Selection

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H. L. MENCKEN

PREJUDICES

A SELECTION

MADE BY

JAMES T. FARRELL

AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HIM



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INTRODUCTION *by James T. Farrell*

During the last year or so, there have been signs of a Mencken revival. His books are selling well, and his name once again appears frequently in the press. I keep meeting intelligent younger people interested in his work and personality. The Mencken legend is being restored.

The time seems ripe for a Mencken revival. There are at least superficial resemblances between the present decade and the 1920's, when Mencken reached the peak of his influence. We are never without buncombe in the world, and today we have more than our share of it. Mencken was more than expert and witty in letting the air out of the buncombe artists. And, further, plutocracy is back both in the saddle and in the forefront of the national consciousness. With the aid of many hired publicity hands, plutocracy is seeking to restore some of the prestige and self-acknowledged honor which it enjoyed in the 1920's. And, while Mencken was conservative in his economic views, he only laughed at

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many of the pretensions of businessmen who turned money-making into a farcical pseudo religion of service, and sometimes into a ludicrous cult of Inspiration. Mencken would never have advocated that the wealth of the late Judge Elbert H. Gary be expropriated. All he did was to describe the big industrialist as though he were a nonentity. His respect for the Rockefellers was no greater. In Mencken's eyes, Gary, the Rockefellers, and Sam Gompers were all inferior men. Of the politician, Mencken had little good to say. With very, very few exceptions, he considered politicians a low order whom the citizen, at best, must bear in fortitude. Until 1936 he usually voted the Democratic ticket, except in 1924, when he cast his ballot for Senator Robert M. La Follette, Sr. He did not agree with La Follette's program or ideas, but he regarded the Wisconsin Senator as a rare bird in politics, an honest man who bravely refused to water down his convictions. Toward Harding, Coolidge, and "Lord Hoover" he was merciless. However, as late as 1934 he regarded President Franklin D. Roosevelt as a gentleman, "honest, gallant and mellowed." Soon after this his view of "Dr. Roosevelt" changed and he wrote of the man with bitterness, rather than with the contempt which he had for some of Roosevelt's predecessors. "Roosevelt Minor" became for him "a milch cow with 125,000,000 teats." Once when I was visiting Mencken during his long years of affliction, he spoke quite differently of President Eisenhower. He remarked: "That fellow has dignity. He's all right." As is known, some of Mencken's most demolishing work dealt with politicians.

Washington is as rich a field for a man of Mencken's talents today as it was in the 1920's. However, it is doubtful that a younger Mencken could now write with the directness and the fearless bluntness of H.L.M. and be published regularly. The conformity and the complacency which he scorned are more noticeable in our publications than at any other period in my own lifetime. There is now perhaps more relevance in Mencken's writing than during the 1930's or the war period. How-

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ever, his work was always tonic and stimulating. We only reduce its buoyant force and the value and pleasure we can gain from it, if we think of Mencken as relevant merely to one or another selected era. Many of his essays, journalistic reports, sundry and miscellaneous writings have risen above and beyond their own time. Is his marvelous satire "Star-Spangled Men" pertinent only to the 1920's? If we interpret Mencken merely as a man of the gaudy, crazy twenties, we will see him only in part. Mencken has always been a stimulating and valuable writer.

II

Mencken shocked and delighted a generation of college students who read *The American Mercury*. But there were and there are values for the mature in Mencken's work. In the twenties he did not write solely for sophomores. He reflected and became a voice for values superior to those which had had such wide currency, not only among the species "boobus Americanus" but also on college campuses and in editorial offices and the realm of the so-called mighty. This might be obscured because of Mencken's ex-cathedra manner, because of his over-generalizations, his humor, and his frequent reliance on the argument of *reductio ad absurdum*, which he often handled not only cleverly but even brilliantly. Furthermore, a realization of Mencken's role in fighting for major values can easily be lost by those who react quickly to his anti-democratic views.

Mencken continually declared that he wrote for "the civilized minority." He meant those who believed in and were interested in ideas and the play of the mind. He meant those whose taste for literature was for books in which you could find truth, a sense of reality, a feeling for the complexities and inexplicableness of men and of their varied destinies. He held the eighteenth century in high esteem, and undoubtedly associated himself with it. In 1931, when writing in *The American Mercury* on "The New Architecture," he stated:

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"The Eighteenth Century . . . had its defects, but they were vastly overshadowed by its merits. It got rid of religion. It lifted music to first place among the arts. It introduced urbanity into manners, and made even war relatively gracious and decent. It took eating and drinking out of the stable and put them into the parlor. It found the sciences childish curiosities, and bent them to the service of men, and elevated them above metaphysics for all time."

His idea of "the civilized minority," of an intellectual aristocracy, was as definitely influenced by the eighteenth century as it was by the Nietzschean idea of the superman. The ideal of reason or rationality and of impersonal causation is at the core of Mencken's thought and his writing. He was a far-off derivative of the Enlightenment, and in twentieth-century America he played something of the role of a Voltaire. In addition, he was a convinced Darwinian. And, despite the rather freewheeling manner in which he made blanket, all-inclusive statements, Mencken could and did think well. Those who declare that he was a great humorist, but minimize his capacities of ratiocination are, I believe, not quite accurate about him. Many of these *Prejudices* show us a man with a strong mind as well as a vigorous, virile spirit full of gusto. His ideas and views became fixed early in life, and, admittedly, he held to his biases and prejudices. He changed his opinions, but never his basic views. Thus, one of his gorgeous essays is "The Sahara of the Bozart," which is included in this selection. He later somewhat revised his views of the South and saw some changes in that region. After having characterized Hollywood as "Moronia," he met a number of intelligent people in the motion-picture industry and accordingly revised his opinion of it.

These essays reveal that Mencken had a ranging, curious mind. Also, while his basic views on democracy, on economics, liberty, and reason were firm and practically immovable, he was a reasonable man ready to recognize grounds for changing his mind on many

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matters of interpretation. People who knew him and corresponded with him encountered many instances of this.

Mencken's views, so challengingly and excitingly expressed in these essays, were well-formed in the early 1900's. From then on, he largely saw in American life evidence to confirm his own ideas. The attitudes from a Victorian-Puritan past were still powerful in America during the early years of this century. Many sentimentalities, pieties, childish and banal simplicities of McGuffey's Readers remained gospel for millions. A colonialized Victorianism with its moral piety was still exerting a suffocating influence in the literary world. Liberation of the mind from the vestiges of this colonialism and the taboos of an over-conventionalized moralism was far from complete. We frequently read of the American tradition as a liberal one of fair play and tolerance. This is but a partial truth. From the frontier and through Lincoln, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman, as well as from the Founding Fathers, we do derive a tradition that is liberal. It should be added here that Mencken rejected the ideas of the historian Frederick Jackson Turner. He saw anew that there was much illiberalism, intolerance, and bigotry in the American past. Especially in small towns and the countryside, narrow-mindedness was rampant. America is so vast that almost everything said about it is likely to be true, and the opposite is probably equally true. Mencken in these *Prejudices* recognized and described much that is true about American life.

From the final years of the nineteenth century onward, America received new and fresh whiffs from Europe. In the arts, one of the agents of this influence was James Huneker, a friend and to some degree an inspirer of Mencken. Also, this was a period when the city triumphed over the country. The superiority of the values of the city over those of the rural areas is crucial and central in these essays, as well as in much of Mencken's other writing. He saw issues of freedom of

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speech, scientific truth versus superstition, and even the phenomenon of Prohibition as part of the conflict between city and country. This explains one of the wittiest essays of this collection, "The Husbandman." And a recent volume of Mencken's journalistic articles on politics, *A Carnival of Buncombe*, reiterates this point. Thus, he wrote in 1928:

"But the battle for Prohibition was more than a struggle for a moral reform: it was also a clear-cut combat between cities and the country, between the civilized centers and the areas of cornbread and revival."

Above all else, you will find here Mencken as a liberating voice. These essays originally strengthened the will of a generation to think independently, to write with greater truth and conviction. He challenged those forces in American life which would have repressed honesty. He dramatically satirized the preposterous, including the malignantly preposterous. He handled and manhandled manners and pieties which stood as barriers to a free development. In addition, his writing is just plain good fun and excitement.

III

"Carlyle was right. The only solution is work." This was a remark which Mencken often made to his friends. With all his vigor and ribaldry, Mencken was, in fact, a strongly pessimistic man. Something of that deep pessimism which intelligent men drew as a conclusion from Darwinism and nineteenth-century determinism was fixed in his nature. He was a rebel in spirit, but not a reformer. He did not believe that either man or society could be much improved. He regarded this life as all that man can ever know, and he had no illusions about it. In his long and rather famous essay "On the National Letters," published in 1919, Mencken criticized popular American fiction of the time on the ground that its usual hero was a second-rate man who struggled to achieve inferior and unsatisfactory ends of material success. In contrast to "the typical American hero" of the success

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novel, he wrote of the hero of first-class or great fiction as a "man of reflective habits." And "what interests this man is the . . . poignant and significant conflict between a salient individual and the harsh and meaningless fiats of destiny, the indestructible mandates and vagaries of God." Here Mencken was actually referring to more than the hero of significant fiction: he was writing of his own inner feeling about life. This, I believe, is the reason why he was so frequently prompted to remark that work was the only solution. At the same time, he was a man who loved his work. He loved writing and reading. He liked writers, too, even though he poked fun at them. He saw them as part of "the civilized minority," and infinitely superior to politicians. He also genuinely enjoyed helping them. In his "Notebooks," published posthumously as *Minority Report*, he jotted down the following:

"I know a great many more people than most men, and in wider and more diverse circles, yet my life is essentially one of isolation, and so is that of every other man. We not only have to die alone; we also, save for a few close associates, have to live alone. I have been able, in my time, to give help to a good many young authors, male and female, and some of them have turned out very well. I often think of the immense number of others that I might have aided if I had only known of them."

I was the last, or at least one of the last, younger writers whom Mencken published in *The American Mercury*. In April 1932, five days before my first novel, *Young Lonigan*, was published, my wife and I arrived in New York from Paris. We had about ten dollars, which we spent on that first day. But the next morning I learned that Mencken had bought a story of mine, "Helen I Love You." I received one hundred dollars for it, and it was published in *The American Mercury*. From then on I corresponded with Mencken until he was stricken in 1948. His letters always came promptly in answer to mine. Many of them were brief, but he was usually to the point. These letters covered a range of

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subjects—literature, political oratory and style, Napoleon, language and slang. I first met Mencken one night in August 1935. I was passing the Hotel Brevoort with Hortense Alden, and she remarked that there was Mencken. He was sitting at a table with Edgar Lee Masters. I introduced myself, and he invited us to sit down. We drank beer and talked for about an hour. Mencken and Masters were good friends, and they enjoyed each other's company. They liked to joke about Bryan, the Fundamentalists, and the yokels, and they did so that evening. Perhaps because I was a younger man, Mencken spoke of his own earlier days. He mentioned Richard Harding Davis as a great reporter of that era, and talked of the Kipling of *Barrack Room Ballads*. And he predicted that Huey Long would be assassinated. It was a most pleasant evening.

I next saw Mencken at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in 1936. As conventions go, it was a very dull one. But it was my first, and I lapped it up, undoubtedly because I had been influenced by Mencken's descriptions. No one but the Kansans took Governor Landon seriously. But they, endlessly singing "Oh Susannah," believed as firmly that Landon would be the next President of the United States as William Jennings Bryan believed in the tenets of Fundamentalism.

At a convention Mencken was not as flamboyant as he is sometimes said to have been. He worked seriously and stayed longer at his seat in the press section than many of the other working reporters. If he had to get his story off when a session closed, he would not stop to drink, but would go to his typewriter. When I watched him, he didn't take many notes. At Cleveland, and again at the 1936 Democratic Convention in Philadelphia, I happened to sit next to him at a number of the sessions. Usually wearing a seersucker suit, he would look out at the swarm of delegates with his glasses sliding down on his nose, his eyes twinkling, and his face lighted up with amusement and interest. In Philadelphia in 1936 I sat next to him on the hot, dull day when President

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Roosevelt was renominated. The platform was crowded with politicians from every corner of the land. One after another, they got in on the act with seconding speeches. This went on for hours and hours and was carried into the night. The floor emptied of delegates, who went off to the ball game, to the saloons, to any place less depressing and boring than the Convention Hall. For on that day the record for an all-time low in the history of political oratory was undoubtedly established. Not one cliché was missed. The platitudes were deadly. The English language was raped. One after another, the politicians came to the rostrum and contributed their bits to the obscene ritual. Included among them was Happy Chandler; no one outdid him. This was a Mencken day, a Mencken scene on the convention floor. Like the delegates, the newspapermen had flown the coop. They were paid to work, but this was too much for them. But I sat it out with Mencken, fascinated. Perhaps the writings of Mencken back in the twenties impelled me. We listened in glee and amazement. He kept shaking his head, peering at the crowd of politicians on the platform. Finally he nudged me.

"Farrell, do you see all of those politicians up there?"

He pointed.

"Every one of them thinks that he can be President of the United States."

In 1945 my brother and I went from Washington to Baltimore to have lunch with Mencken. As he took us to his club, he half apologized, explaining that he had lambasted it and the other members but that he had found it more convenient to meet people for lunch there than at home. He was, needless to say, most gracious in his concern about what we ate and how we liked the food. He was a genuine gentleman.

Mencken was a good and fluent talker, and he had much to say that day. Because my brother was a doctor, Mencken spoke of medicine and insanity. He asserted his belief that eventually science would prove that insanity was caused by a condition in the blood; he ex-

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patiated on this theory. He also spoke of Ezra Pound, then but recently committed to St. Elizabeth's Hospital.

Mencken had visited Pound, taking along an armful of books of poetry. He'd told the doctor that the books were all poetry, "as bad as Ezra's." Mencken did not admire most poetry, as is well known. However, he was one of the first writers to visit Pound. This was characteristic of him. He would often do such things. He never knew Leon Trotsky and had no great respect for the man. However, when Trotsky was in exile in Prinkipo, Mencken read that there had been a fire in his home and that Trotsky's library was said to have been destroyed. Mencken wrote to Trotsky, offering to send him some books. Later, in Mexico, I discussed American writers with Trotsky, and he mentioned Mencken and that letter. Asking about Mencken, Trotsky said that he had never answered the letter. Why should he have accepted books from Mencken? The letter to Trotsky came into our conversation at Baltimore. Mencken made little of it. Trotsky's not having replied did not trouble him. He said that, having read of the fire, he had offered to send Trotsky some books that he might need for his work. But Trotsky, so often a gracious and impeccably polite man in personal relationships, was too haughty to respond to what was a friendly and impersonal gesture.

At that time, blood and blood pressure were on Mencken's mind. For, after having spoken of blood as the possible source or cause of insanity, he mentioned President Roosevelt, who had died two months previously.

"Jesus, his blood pressure must have been way up," Mencken said.

A few moments later he again mentioned Roosevelt's blood pressure. And then, after about five minutes more, he said:

"In four years I'll have a stroke and die."

I laughed at him and said that I didn't believe it. He insisted that this would happen. His stroke came about

six months short of four years later, and it almost killed him.

He also spoke of books and writers, and remarked that, in the end, perhaps only scenes remained as great literature. This was the case, he said, with *Babbitt* and also with what he considered to be Dreiser's best work. Mencken had affection for Dreiser, but regarded the man as a peasant. He remarked that if Dreiser became ill, and walked along a street where there were two signs, one reading Dr. Osler and the other Dr. Quack, you could bet all your money that Dreiser would go in to Dr. Quack every time.

It was when we were walking back to the railroad station that he suddenly asked:

"Farrell, how old are you?"

I told him forty-one. He said that I was young, had a wonderful future, and would possibly still write my best books.

"Farrell, if you want to develop further as a writer, there are three things to stay away from. Booze . . . women . . . and politics."

These, he insisted, killed a literary talent. He mentioned Ring Lardner, whom he had seen often. Lardner, he said, would sit for hours, drinking in a morose silence.

Luncheon with Mencken was always a happy event.

IV

It was a gray fall afternoon in the period after Mencken had had a cerebral hemorrhage. I stopped off in Baltimore and took a cab to his house in Hollins Street. Mencken, wearing a blue suit, met me at the door. He did not look ill. In fact, he appeared hale and healthy. But then I realized definitely that he had become an old man. The first question he asked was:

"How are my friends?"

We went to his office or workroom and talked.

"I'm out of it. I'm finished. I wish I were dead."

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He explained that he could no longer work. He was unable to read or write. The only thing he could do was help his secretary, who was arranging his correspondence, which was to go to a library.

Mencken's stroke, suffered in the fall of 1948, destroyed or affected the association tracts in his brain. He had great difficulty in remembering proper nouns or names. While I was with him on this occasion and later, he said that he knew me and remembered my books. But he didn't know my name; after I told it to him, he said he remembered.

"If I could read and write, I'd be content," he said. "I'm out of it."

He described how he lived. In spring he did some work in his garden. He and his brother August collected boxes and pieces of wood in the alley, and he broke them up. He went to some movies. During the first years he could go to Florida or be driven around Baltimore. Later he could not go out much. He would look out at the park or square in front of his home, watch the people in it, watch the children coming home from school, guess and speculate about them and their ages. He would walk around and talk to the Negro children in the neighborhood. Every afternoon he took a nap, and he went to bed early.

"I listen to the machine, the machine upstairs," he said, pointing upward. "The machine, they're all morons."

He meant the radio.

And people. He spoke of "the publisher." He meant Alfred Knopf, who would visit him. And "his friend," the "drama critic." It was George Jean Nathan. So it went. As soon as the name was supplied him, his memory functioned. He also mentioned books he'd like to re-read. And there was the refrain in his conversation: he was out of it. And the second refrain: he would just as soon be dead. But, considering what had happened to him, his condition was good.

His voice was just a bit thick. Sometimes the wrong word would come. After a period of conversation his

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thoughts would wander. He was aware of this, and even commented on it. For two or three minutes we would speak of another subject. Then he would pick up the threads of the conversation.

He spoke, also, of the night when he had his stroke while at a restaurant in Baltimore. His description conveyed a sense of sick agony. But he was realistic and resigned about his condition. He had, in a sense, suggested his own final days, years before, when he had written of the hero of major fiction, a superior man, "a salient individual" in conflict with "harsh and meaningless fiats of destiny." His biological tragedy, this harshness of his destiny, was all the more cruel and punishing because he was deprived of his main surcease—his work.

On that first visit after his stroke, we talked for a long time, perhaps two hours. It was dark out when I left. He accompanied me to the door and reminded me to tell his friends that he was doing well. But after a pause he added:

"Remember me to my friends. Tell them I'm a hell of a mess."

Such were the last days of H. L. Mencken. He bore them with courage.

V

It should be clear to the reader that the preparation of this volume was to me a joy, a labor of love, and a privilege. These selections are all taken from Mencken's six volumes of *Prejudices*, which were published between 1919 and 1927. A number of them, however, appeared first in *The Smart Set* or *The American Mercury*. They represent Mencken when he was at the peak of his influence and had, in fact, become a legend. Here is some of his wittiest and most buoyant writing. Something of his wide range of interests and his broad field of reference is to be found in these essays. Many of them are unforgettable. Here, in my opinion, is some of the very best of H. L. Mencken.

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I was not guided by any one principle of selection. I chose what I liked and what I think and hope will be enjoyable to old and new readers of Mencken. It had been my desire to avoid any duplication of the selection in Alistair Cooke's excellently edited *The Vintage Mencken*. However, there are a few duplications of pieces just too good and impressive to omit. The Cooke volume, let me add, unlike this one, draws from the entire body of Mencken's writings. Also, I should like to call special attention to the essays on George Jean Nathan and James Huneker. These men were his friends. His name is bound up with theirs. In addition, in a couple of instances I have made small deletions, but wherever this was done I have placed dots. I wish to express gratitude to my wife, Dorothy B. Farrell, my secretary, Mrs. Luna Wolf, and Mrs. Louise Richmond for assisting me in the editing and mechanical preparation of this book.

Here, then, is a selection from Mencken's *Prejudices*. I hope these writings may give others as much pleasure as they have given me over the years stretching back to my own youth.

JAMES T. FARRELL