

John Hersey Revisited

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Warren French, Editor

University of Wales, Swansea



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John Hersey Revisited

By David Sanders

Harvey Mudd College

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JOHN HERSEY

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In memory of my mother and my father.

About the Author

David Sanders is professor of English at Harvey Mudd College, where he has been Miller Professor of Humanities, chairman of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, and chairman of the faculty. He has also taught at UCLA (where he received his B.A. in 1949 and Ph.D. in 1956) the Claremont Graduate School, the University of Maryland, and Clarkson University. He has been Fulbright lecturer at the University of Salamanca in Spain and visiting research professor at the Institute of American Studies, Academia Sinica, Taipei.

Sanders is the author of *Studies in "U.S.A."* and *John Dos Passos: A Comprehensive Bibliography*. His articles, reviews, and poems on various subjects have appeared in such publications as *American Quarterly*, *Lost Generation Journal*, *National Pastime*, *Paris Review*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Spitball*, and *Studies in American Fiction*.

Preface

John Hersey was still teaching at Yale—the writing of fiction one semester, the application of fictional techniques to journalism the next—when he began work on *The Call*, a novel about a missionary in China. The hero would be his father's contemporary, starting out as a YMCA secretary in Shanghai in the first decade of the twentieth century, as Roscoe Hersey did in Tientsin, and his career would go beyond the elder Hersey's retirement to the virtual end of the Protestant mission in 1949. Although Hersey states that the fictional David Treadup is drawn from the lives of six actual missionaries, including Roscoe Hersey, it is obvious that he is more than this composite. When Treadup is interned by the Japanese in 1942, cut off from his work and despairing of his God, he becomes the central, even the culminating, figure for all of the contemporary history in Hersey's fiction and reportage.

Treadup is also a writer. His voice cries out from his diaries and letters so insistently that his obsession with his work and, even more, his self-centeredness must come from Hersey's knowledge of a novelist's life as much as anything the writer could have got from the papers of his six missionaries. The writing of *The Call* in the late seventies and early eighties coincided with Hersey's publishing a small flood of reminiscences. He remembered his first job with Sinclair Lewis and details of his longer employment by Henry Luce. In 1981 he went to his native Tientsin after an absence of thirty-five years—much of that time fearing he would never see China again—and wrote an account of the visit and the memories it evoked in a series for the *New Yorker*. When *The Call* was published in 1985, Hersey, who had interviewed Ralph Ellison and John Cheever, finally agreed to be interviewed himself. All of this helps to make *The Call* Hersey's most personal novel, his crowning work (as many have judged it), and the occasion for any of his longtime readers to reconsider his other writing.

My book on John Hersey for the Twayne United States Authors Series was written in 1965 after I had read *White Lotus*, an ambitious novel strangely savaged by many reviewers. I understood the story of American whites enslaved in a Chinese yellow empire as primarily a parallel to the history of African slaves and their descendants in the United States. While I realized that Hersey's childhood as a foreigner influenced this work, I could not have known then that it enabled him to imagine how this story might be told.

That is only one perception of Hersey's earlier work that came to me after reading *The Call* and then going back to Hersey's reports from China in the confused times of 1945 and 1946. *John Hersey Revisited* is as much a new reading of the work up to *White Lotus* as it is an introduction to what Hersey has written since.

Chapter 1 is about Hersey's career as a correspondent for *Time* and *Life*; *A Bell for Adano*, with its background in immediate events; and *Hiroshima*, which is partly shaped by what Hersey has called "the possibilities of fiction." Chapter 2 describes the writing of *The Wall* and how Hersey's obligation to tell of what he had seen and heard in Eastern Europe at the end of the war led to "Noach Levinson's archive," the strange form this massive novel assumed. Chapter 3 examines four novels from a decade that Hersey gave almost entirely to writing fiction. One of them, *A Single Pebble*, with its young American engineer hoping to transform China with his technology, can be read now as the beginning of a story that ends in *The Call*. Chapter 4 is devoted mostly to the narrator of *White Lotus*, whose singular language is Hersey's English "translation" of the Mandarin she acquired as a slave stripped of a very meager American culture. Chapter 5 considers the writing Hersey got done in twelve years as Master of Pierson College and adjunct professor of English at Yale: an investigation of the 1967 racial tensions in Detroit; novels and a polemic about education that derive from his concern with the fate of bright children in a democratic school system; and writing about writing in allegory, *Under the Eye of the Storm*, a historical novel, and commentary in *The Writer's Craft*. Chapter 6 is a reading of *The Call*, which carries over to a conclusion in which Hersey is discussed among his contemporaries as a distinguished novelist of ideas and a central figure for understanding differences between fiction and journalism.

I am grateful to Warren French for a discerning, meticulous reading of this manuscript and to Liz Traynor Fowler, Barbara Sutton, and Rob Winston for editorial assistance. Help from Murray Berman and the late Ted Weissbuch on my original *John Hersey* has been no less valuable for this book. I have remembered Sylvia Bowman's reading of that manuscript many times in writing this one. I thank Professor Tad Beckman, chairman, humanities and social sciences, Harvey Mudd College, for granting me travel funds, and Donna Schaefer and Fay Hicks for assistance with the laser printer. As always, Honnold and Sprague Libraries of the Claremont Colleges gave me invaluable support. In 1986 I spent a semester at the Institute of American Studies, Academia Sinica, Taipei, drawing a certain inspiration for this book, particularly from my good friend Chu Yen, dean of liberal arts at Taiwan National University, while I worked on other projects. That visit and a brief trip to the

mainland stirred memories of China and the far Pacific as I had first known them more than forty years earlier.

I thank John and Barbara Hersey for their hospitality at Vineyard Haven, where I interviewed the writer for most of a brilliant day in view of the water. He has graciously answered my questions on many other occasions and sent me such elusive materials as "Intelligence, Choice, and Consent" and "The Need for Memory." I am grateful for his encouragement over the years and even more for having met him.

I have dedicated this book to my parents, remembering especially ten years of childhood in Peru, where my mother taught and my father was a metallurgical engineer, not a missionary. My daughter-in-law, Tracey Pera Sanders, found a way to get me started on my word processor, fitly enough on Thanksgiving weekend two years ago. All of her new in-laws help sustain me, now from many parts of this country, as they have before. I owe most to my wife, Mary-Frances, who was at Taipei and Vineyard Haven, as well as at Claremont and Lake Ozonia day by day, for the happy time of writing this book.

David Sanders

Harvey Mudd College

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Chronology

- 1914 John Richard Hersey born 17 June in Tientsin, China, youngest son of Roscoe and Grace Baird Hersey, American Protestant missionaries.
- 1920–1924 Attends the British Grammar School and the American School, Tientsin.
- 1924 Family returns to the United States; John attends Briarcliff Manor (New York) public schools.
- 1927–1932 Attends Hotchkiss School, Lakeville, Connecticut.
- 1932–1936 Attends Yale University, graduating with a B.A. in general studies; letters in football and works for the *News*.
- 1936–1937 Studies eighteenth-century English literature at Clare College, Cambridge University.
- 1937 Works as Sinclair Lewis's secretary in the summer; joins the staff of *Time* in the fall.
- 1939–1945 Correspondent for *Time* (1939–45) and *Life* (1942–45) in China, the South Pacific, the Mediterranean Theater, and Moscow.
- 1942 *Men on Bataan*, July.
- 1943 *Into the Valley*, July.
- 1944 *A Bell for Adano*, February.
- 1944–1945 While assigned to Moscow visits ruins of Warsaw, Lodz, and Tallinn ghettos and a detention camp at Klooga, Estonia.
- 1945 Awarded Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *A Bell for Adano*, 8 May.
- 1945–1946 On assignment in China and Japan for *Life* and the *New Yorker*.
- 1946 *Hiroshima* published in the *New Yorker* on 31 August, followed by book publication in October.
- 1948 Beginning of memberships in Authors League of America and other writers' organizations, often as officer and always as active member.

- 1950 *The Wall*, April.
- 1953 *The Marmot Drive*, November. At thirty-nine, becomes the youngest writer ever elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 1954 Member of National Citizens Committee for the Public Schools, the first of many activities on national and local levels of public education.
- 1956 *A Single Pebble*, June.
- 1956–1957 Visits relocation camps near the Austro-Hungarian border and writes continuity for a United Nations film on Hungarian refugees.
- 1959 *The War Lover*, September.
- 1960 *The Child Buyer*, September.
- 1963 *Here to Stay: Studies in Human Tenacity*, January.
- 1965 *White Lotus*, January; begins five-year term as Master of Pierson College, Yale University, 26 May; reads from *Hiroshima* at White House Arts Festival, 2 June.
- 1966 *Too Far to Walk*, February.
- 1967 *Under the Eye of the Storm*, March.
- 1968 *The Algiers Motel Incident*, June (report on 1967 riots in Detroit).
- 1970 *Letter to the Alumni*, September (report on events at Yale in the spring of 1970); on leave from Yale at the American Academy in Rome, 1970–71; adjunct professor of English at Yale until retirement in 1984.
- 1972 *The Conspiracy*, March.
- 1974 *My Petition for More Space*, September.
- 1975 *The President*, April (from *New York Times Magazine* article on President Gerald R. Ford).
- 1977 *The Walnut Door*, September.
- 1980 *Aspects of the Presidency*, June (republication of *The President* and 1951 *New Yorker* article on President Harry S. Truman).
- 1981 Visits Tientsin and other sites in China for the first time since 1946.

- 1985 *The Call*, May; new edition of *Hiroshima* with epilogue on fortieth anniversary of bombing, 6 August.
- 1987 *Blues*, May.
- 1988 Commentary for *Manzanar*, collection of Ansel Adams's photographs of Japanese American relocation in 1942.
- 1989 *Life Sketches*, June (essay collection).
- 1990 *Fling and Other Stories*, March.

Chapter One

Reporting Fact, Inventing Fiction

I have always believed that the *devices* of fiction could serve journalism well and might even help it to aspire now and then to the level of art. But I have tried to honor the distinction between the two forms.

—Hersey, “The Legend on the License” (1980)

For more than fifty years John Hersey has reported fact and invented fiction. He has taken pains to draw the line between them, and he has been severely tested in holding to that line. As he gained a reputation for reporting with *Into the Valley* (1943) and dispatches for *Time* and *Life*, he became, very suddenly, a best-selling novelist with *A Bell for Adano* (1944) and the incredulous winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction on 8 May 1945—VE-day. His wartime journalism—the articles based on observation in the field, not the summaries of events he ground out in *Time*’s New York headquarters—bore what Hersey later called “the legend on the license” of reporting: “NONE OF THIS WAS MADE UP.”¹ The wartime novel, on the other hand, *had* to be made up, because he felt he could not merely report the story of General Patton. Hersey invented a conflict between an arrogant, grandiose general and a sensitive, pragmatic American military governor, and the resulting fiction became an earnest statement on the prospects for peace as well as the conduct of war. Two years later he would interview survivors of the first atomic bomb for an account of what he had not seen and could barely begin to imagine. *Hiroshima*, touched with a novelist’s technique, would be so praised as journalism that it overshadowed not merely *A Bell for Adano* but, for some critics, all of Hersey’s subsequent efforts to write fiction.

Hersey’s singular career began professionally when he reported to work for *Time* in 1937, attracted by what he judged to be “the liveliest enterprise of its type.”² As with most other writers, signs of his vocation had come when he was much younger, even as a missionary’s youngest child in Tientsin, publishing “The Hersey Family News.” Although his four years at Yale were also filled with football and a combined major entitled “History, Arts, and Letters,” it was there that he gave up the violin for writing. A year at Clare College, Cambridge, extended his idea of writing to include poetry and fiction. At twenty-three, wanting to become a writer, he spent a summer in New

York City and Connecticut as secretary and general factotum to Sinclair Lewis. Although Hersey was charmed by Lewis, he read the fresh typescript of *The Prodigal Parents* and silently perceived its inferiority to the earlier Lewis novels he had read.³ The job at *Time* came from persistence and contacts, and Hersey became one of the anonymous young men writing "Milestones" and "Miscellany." He gained no such reputation as James Agee's for film reviews that needed no bylines, but among colleagues who also included the poet and classicist Robert Fitzgerald, Hersey's style could often be identified in almost any section except "Science."

He went to work for Henry Luce a few weeks after Japanese troops had stormed across the Marco Polo Bridge in Peking in July of 1937, the incident most commonly marking the beginning of the Sino-Japanese conflict that became subsumed in World War II. His career with Luce's publications was affected considerably by the American "mishkid" background in China he shared with Luce and by striking differences between Luce and Hersey missionary households. According to some accounts, the bond was once strong enough for Luce to think of Hersey as a possible successor by the time he sent him on a brief assignment to the Chungking bureau in 1939.⁴ They did not then disagree as implacably as they would later about virtually every Chinese question except the imperative of victory over the Japanese. Filing his first stories from overseas, Hersey had yet to earn a byline.

The peculiar anonymity *Time* imposed on its staff was one condition of a news-gathering system that departed from the American journalistic backgrounds of earlier writers. Ernest Hemingway, working with rewrite men at the Kansas City *Star*, experienced something closer to *Time*'s processes than anything such reporters as Stephen Crane and Walt Whitman ever knew, but none of them—not even Hemingway dispatching cables in the early twenties—undertook such labors of summary and reduction as were routinely assigned to Hersey. John Reed and Richard Harding Davis traveled far on assignments, but not so quickly or abruptly as Hersey did in flying from one theater of World War II to another.

In their anonymous undertakings, Hersey and his colleagues were often subject to Henry Luce's personal journalism, which may have reached an extreme with Whittaker Chambers's editing of foreign reports from Hersey and others in 1944–45, but it was often expressed directly from Luce to a writer. It grated more keenly on Hersey than on his colleagues because he knew more about its source than they did. Roscoe Hersey, the reporter's father, was a YMCA secretary posted to Tientsin, while the publisher's father, Henry Winters Luce, had gone out to China almost a generation earlier as a Presbyterian missionary. The elder Hersey was influenced by the social gos-

pel, and most of his work was taken up with improving the quality of everyday life in China. The elder Luce, by contrast, was primarily an evangelist, even though (in Hersey's words) he was "destined to be not a soul-saver, but a fund-raiser."⁵ The writer's Tientsin childhood, as he has described it, was spent in and out of the missionary household, roaming the city's nine foreign concessions. Hersey quotes Henry Luce saying of his Chefoo school days that Americans "were a strong, conspicuous, successful minority" at a place where "hardly an hour passed that an American did not have to run up the flag."⁶

In 1939 Hersey and Luce were nominally neutral Americans when the writer was sent out to *Time's* Chungking bureau and traveled as well to Japan and to occupied China, including Tientsin. In Chungking, Hersey hired Theodore White as a stringer, beginning another *Time* and *Life* career that would crumble at the end of the war in disagreements with Luce over reporting China's fate. White, then a recent Harvard graduate in Chinese studies, found in Hersey "every quality I then admired most in any contemporary. . . . Above all, he loved China . . . as much as I did or Luce did; and his fascination lay not so much with daily journalism as with history itself."⁷ Hersey's love of China was then accompanied by a dislike, nurtured in childhood, of Japan, an animosity he restrained during a quick stop in Tokyo to interview the American ambassador, Joseph C. Grew. In his first bylined article, Hersey noted that in the summer of 1940 "Japanese-American friendship [had] suddenly become a pressing matter."⁸ The McCormick and Patterson newspapers were arguing for the practical necessity of a strong Japan, and numerous military experts, already focused on Europe, were advancing the old maxim that it was better not to court trouble on two fronts. Ambassador Grew, Hersey wrote, was trying to prove a lifelong belief that "a gentleman can always get the better of a tough guy by continuing to act like a gentleman." Thus, a Hotchkiss and Yale graduate characterized a Grotonian and Harvard man. Grew frankly advocated befriending Japan, and, according to Hersey, he was remarkably successful: "After his complaints about the *Panay*, 70,000,000 Japanese considered themselves personally responsible to him." Grew practiced "dynamic appeasement," a strange phrase to come from the young correspondent who would soon be writing about "the Japs" in *Time's* "World Battlefronts" department as well as in his own dispatches from the Pacific.

Hersey and others in the disastrous weeks after Pearl Harbor would grind dispatches from the Philippines and elsewhere into grave summaries running to four and five pages and appearing after "U.S. at War" and before "Foreign News." Candid about the unchecked progress of "the Japs" and limited by what the Allied military disclosed of the magnitude of defeat, "World Bat-

tlefronts" was an entirely typical reflection of contemporary anxiety. The same tone rings throughout Hersey's first book.

Eventually Hersey would persuade his publisher to delete *Men on Bataan* from the list of his published books. He disowned it, he said many years afterward, because it was "too adulatory of MacArthur."⁹ It consists of alternating chapters about the general and the men under his command; the MacArthur sections form a brief biography going back to his boyhood at army posts, while those about his men are limited to the four months' action after 7 December. "You ought to know them for they are like you,"¹⁰ Hersey wrote at the beginning of his first chapter on these men, using the direct address to readers that reinforced so much wartime journalism. Writing of MacArthur, he judged that it was important not to react too skeptically toward the MacArthur myths and proceeded to record how persistently the general was first and foremost in virtually everything he had undertaken. With little expressed reservation, Hersey quoted such MacArthur pronouncements as "By God, it was destiny that sent me here." It was equally difficult to avoid excessive praise elsewhere in the work, as when Hersey recounted Captain Colin Kelly's reported exploit of having sunk the Japanese battleship *Haruna* by crash-diving his fighter plane into one of its stacks. Indeed, Hersey committed every word of the book to the war effort, as when he assured his reader that his compatriots on Bataan had "reacted as you will when your crisis comes, splendidly and worthily, with no more mistakes than necessary." (7).

Hersey wrote the book in New York. It has in common with *Hiroshima* and *The Wall* Hersey's urgent effort—amounting to a duty—to report what he had not seen by a strenuously sympathetic effort to understand the testimony of those who had. In his circumstances in early 1942, he was understandably less resourceful and more limited in his means than he would be with his later books. He worked from *Time* and *Life* files, interviews with *Time* and *Life* reporters who had been on Bataan, letters from families of his servicemen subjects, and a Library of Congress bibliography of General MacArthur published in late February. MacArthur, ordered out on 22 February, left the Philippines on 11 March ("MacArthur's body was out, free and heroic. But his spirit was in the Philippines" ([310]); *Men on Bataan* was published in July. It may be remarkable that in the rush of putting the book together, Hersey would record some details of combat experience that he could verify once he took to the field himself. He wrote of Sergeant Joe Stanley Smith, one of the unlucky New Mexico National Guardsmen stationed on Bataan: "His sensations by his own account later took in everything from hot flashes to the calm a man feels only on the toilet seat" (22). This de-