

# ROSS OF THE NEW YORKER

*Concluding the pro (and con) file of the editor who made his magazine a literary institution*



*At the heart of The New Yorker and its reputation for urbanity, the cosmopolitan touch, and a supranational view, is a gifted and increasingly fabulous editor, Harold Ross. Born and brought up in Colorado, indifferently educated, he is the loud-voiced antithesis of his magazine's bemonocled, top-hatted trademark, "Eustace Tilley." Yet it was he who dreamed up The New Yorker twenty-three years ago and who has shaped it into a legend of taste, wit, and comely prose, a hornbook of the intelligentsia, begetter of literary fashions, and source of profits.*

By HENRY F. PRINGLE

**C**HARACTERISTICALLY, Harold Ross, editor of *The New Yorker*, not only reads every line of copy that goes into the magazine but wrangles over practically every one of the 50,000 words that make up the average issue. He will query a piece on girdles: "Aren't you overdoing the word 'daring'?" Most of the time he edits from galley proofs, which have already been worked on by his staff; but "The Talk of the Town" column, one of *The New Yorker's* most brilliant features, he will fuss over in the original copy.

Actually, since Ross's staff is just as frenzied as he is about accuracy and clarity, more work goes into the editing of each important piece in an issue than goes into the whole of most magazines. When an article is bought, William Shawn, the shy, unpretentious managing editor, in charge of the journalistic material (or "fact pieces") in the magazine, gives it a preliminary going-over. Three editors, including Ross, read separate galley proofs and make detailed suggestions and queries. All these are transferred to a master proof, over which Shawn and the writer may work for hours. Concurrently, checkers have been running down factual information and



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*"Rich man, poor man, innocent victim of social maladjustment."*

supplying queries, comments, additional material. Before the article goes to press a *fourth* editor, a fresh mind, attacks the story and turns in final suggestions. Altogether there are eighteen working copies of each set of proofs of every article.

This may sound overmeticulous, but out of it comes the extraordinarily high standard of style and reporting in the nonfiction pieces. But it also accounts for a certain singleness of tone, which has caused a former employee to remark, testily, that *The New Yorker* is written by one first-rate writer with a hundred names. It may also partly account for the monotony and cut-to-a-pattern quality of much of the fiction—which is rapidly becoming *The New Yorker's* Achilles' heel.

Ross's insistence upon accuracy may also reflect his fear of libel litigation, a phobia which is one of the occupational diseases of editors and is particularly prevalent among the wielders of satire and irony. He was thoroughly alarmed when, in the early days of the magazine, an architect, one of whose buildings was described as "looking like a grain elevator," brought suit. Ross felt the magazine had been unfair to make a target of the architect. Also, his knowledge of the law is rough and ready; he feared that an action might be brought in Kansas or some other outlandish place to which a stray copy of the magazine might have wandered—in which case he would be forced to languish there, waiting to testify, for months. So,





*"I think we'll make it. It's a lucky thing the Crawfords were with us."*

in panic, he printed an apology, and the suit was withdrawn.

Perhaps too much has been made of Ross's volcanic disposition. It is to a large extent sound and fury. A terrible-tempered Mr. Bang, he greatly scares the highly scareable, but in his dealings with his staff he is often perfectly reasonable and patient. It is true that he swears inordinately, using most of the four-letter words even over the telephone. Once, after a stream of profanity had for some minutes poured from his office into a nearby cubicle, one of the less flexible ladies on Ross's staff could stand it no longer. "Your language is absolutely disgraceful," she told *The New Yorker's* editor. "All right, I'll move down the hall," he said meekly.

"Goddamn it, that's not the way to do it," he will shout to a writer or staff man. But he will listen to the other man's point of view, and real injustice is rarely imputed to him. His fury is professional, not personal; the magazine is his life and he fights like a wildcat for it. He has his standards, built up over many years of trial and error. All he asks—but it is a big all—is for others to live up to them.

He can be brutal, and he is certainly never honeyed, but he pays writers a compliment which some of the more remunerative mass magazines rarely pay them: that of respect and confidence. "Write it the way you see it," he says, without laying down draconic laws about length. Consequently, writers respect him, and their respect is increased by the editing he and his staff impose on their copy. When writers are grateful to editors—that's news. Ross actually admires creative people—this also is rare reflected in their copy or their handling of copy. Recently one of his assistants engaged a new





*"Oh, you use two pinches of mandragora!"*

woman editor and took her to lunch at the Algonquin. Ross wandered over, was vaguely introduced, wandered off again. "After about two years," the veteran said to the new lady editor, "I'll tell him you're working for him."

Ross's taste dominates the choice of the magazine's cartoons. He knows that gags sell magazines and he concentrates on that. As for the art involved, his basic criterion, as with text, is clarity. A picture of a hatbox must show the string around the box. A man carrying a stick prompts him to ask, "Where did he get that stick?"

Ross can severely try the patience of his colleagues. He is miffed if a contributor takes time off to write a book, does everything he can to marry his writers undivorcably to *The New Yorker*, and vehemently resents their vacations. Mere diversion, he feels, should never be permitted to interfere with the creative flow. "What in hell do you want to go to California for?" he demanded of one writer. "Everybody in this god-damned office keeps going off to some ----- place while I sit here and slave my ----- guts out." He had forgotten that he had just returned from a trip abroad.

Within half an hour he usually forgets what the berating was about, though in most other respects his memory is phenomenal.

For years Ross has been trying to drive up the production curve of his writers. For one thing, he has paid them more and more, until now *The New Yorker's* rates are comparable with those of slick magazines having five times the



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circulation. To regular staff writers, Ross grants liberal drawing accounts in the form of weekly pay checks. These represent payment for articles not yet written; hence the writer is under pressure to produce enough copy each year to balance his account. Sometimes this works wonders; often it merely unnerves the writer. There was a time when virtually no one on the staff was able to catch up with himself financially. By dint of several consecutive months of plugging, one man finally drew even, but by the time he had finished celebrating, he was already hopelessly behind.

In part, this unorthodox financial system may be merely the auditors' effort to keep up with the editors. Ross and his business department speak to one another about as often as Macy's does to Gimbel's. Although in the same building, the editorial and advertising offices are separated by two stories. In 1945, when the company's treasurer, who handles writers' contracts, had himself installed on one of the editorial floors, it was months before Ross was even aware of the change. The editor will brook no editorial interference from the business management; and *The New Yorker's* advertisers have sometimes come in for pretty severe handling in its columns.

Nor have relations between Ross and the magazine's chief owner always been smooth. For months, once, Ross refused to speak to publisher Raoul H. F. Fleischmann, and one editor did little except pass messages back and forth between them. One staff member recalls a day when Fleischmann dropped in to inquire about a mutual friend. "He was nervous all the time," says the editor, "for fear Ross would catch him on the editorial floor." Fleischmann cheerfully admits that Ross has always treated him purely as a businessman. To date, many members of the advertising department do not even know what Ross looks like.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Ross looks down his nose at money-making. One close associate credits him with a



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hard, practical business head, and considers him thoroughly conversant with the profit-and-loss end of the magazine. This is not in the main a consequence of his own financial involvement. Ross, who originally held about 10 per cent of the stock, is now a trustee for a block of less than 2 per cent, and owns none at all personally. Though he doubtless draws a generous salary, his interest in the business has to do with the fact, not that *The New Yorker* is his livelihood, but that it is his life.

Others have profited more concretely. It is estimated that Fleischmann, in capital appreciation, dividends, and salary, has made a couple of millions out of *The New Yorker* on an investment of about \$560,000. Ross has made woefully less than that, has little of it left, and is pretty chagrined about it. When Ross was divorced from his first wife, Jane Grant, he gave her some of his *New Yorker* stock in settlement. It was then practically valueless, but it was all Ross had to give her. Her name still appears in the magazine's annual statement as one of the few "stockholders holding one per cent or more of the capital stock."

Ross's conception of what *The New Yorker* is and should be is probably the basis of his obsession that some morning he will awake to find Henry R. Luce owning the magazine. His dislike of Luce and all his works is natural: the Luce magazines, whatever their other qualities, are primarily anonymous, paste-pot operations; and Ross's magazine, whatever its defects, is primarily a personal, creative one. It is perhaps no accident that the most devastating profile he ever published was one of Luce, written in *Timestyle* and acid by Wolcott Gibbs. This appeared in 1936. After more than ten years, there remains the awful possibility, from Luce's point of view, that Gibbs's piece will go down in history as his definitive biography.

The editors of *Life* once invited *The New Yorker's* Janet Flanner to do an article on the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. She declined. They raised the price. Miss Flan



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ner felt she couldn't afford to refuse, and asked Ross's advice. It was characteristic. "I'd like you to get the money," he said, "but they'll break your heart, baby."

It has been recently rumored that Luce has acquired stock in *The New Yorker*. If this were true, it would probably multiply the number of Ross's ulcers by at least ten. The facts are these: in the early '30s, one of the stockholders, in need of cash, sold about 3,000 shares over the counter. They were bought by a broker for Time, Inc. Time, Inc., held them a while, drew a 100 per cent stock dividend, and then sold out. Luce holds no *New Yorker* stock at the present time.

Personally a conservative, Ross has never allowed his social and political convictions to influence the editorial policy of the magazine. He has complained that all the good young writers these days are liberals or radicals; but, if they're good, he prints their stuff. He once argued vehemently with the author of a profile of a press lord on the ground that the interpretation was too hard on the subject. The author stuck to his guns; the piece came out about as originally written. Whatever may be Ross's own politics, *The New Yorker* itself has become increasingly liberal and international—indeed, supranational—in outlook. Here the influence of E. B. White, who writes many of the "Notes and Comment" pieces on the opening page, is apparent. Ross, recognizing in White one of the outstanding essayists of our time, wisely gives him an almost completely free hand.

Westbrook Pegler used to be one of Ross's pals, but they have drifted apart. It is said that Pegler felt that the magazine was go-



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"One 'Get-Well' card. I'll read it here."

ing out of its way to pick on him. This may have been true, but, if so, it was not Ross's fault. He never would have instituted the attacks; on the other hand, he would never think of influencing his writers to soften or eliminate them.

His friends are drawn largely from journalistic, theatrical, literary, and business circles. He knows nothing whatever of New York society. He once hired an editor for the sole reason that the man could tell one Vanderbilt from another—and then couldn't conceal a typically Russian indignation whenever he noticed the copy of the *Social Register* on the editor's desk. Later he complicated matters by taking on as one of his editors a Vanderbilt who was *not* in the *Social Register*.

Ross used to dislike the suburbs, announcing that he would have no damned commuters in the office because they kept looking at the damned clock in order to make their damned trains and get home to their damned wives. He also told his staff they could not have the "feel" of New York unless they lived in the city. But today, he himself commutes to Stamford, Connecticut, to a pleasant seven-acre place and an attractive wife.

One of his staff, who still cannot quite understand how his boss composes a harmonious unit out of risqué cartoons, important social commentary, notes on perfumes, and other odds and ends, is equally baffled by his personal life: "He keeps marrying all these women and then never sees them." This is an exaggeration, as Ross is quite frequently at his own fire-side. As for "all these women," Ross has been married three times—plus his permanent liaison with *The New Yorker*.



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He nearly always stays out scandalously late on Tuesday nights, when the Hoyle Club meets above the Barberry Room on East 52nd Street. This is the successor to the old Thanatopsis Literary and Inside Straight Club which used to stage marathon poker bouts. The games are more restrained now, but the familiars still attend. Among them are George S. Kaufman, Howard Lindsay, Russel Crouse, and Franklin P. Adams. Ross, who is a genius at poker, as at almost any game of chance, manages to relax completely at the sessions, which sometimes last until four o'clock in the morning.

Among Ross's other hobbies are the collecting of damning facts about life insurance, which he firmly believes to be a sinister racket; and the amassing of information on harems and eunuchs, on both of which he considers himself an authority. His sense of comedy is properly *New Yorkerish* and fantastic. For years he listed Eustace Tilley in the Manhattan telephone book, and was enchanted when the city authorities sent this mythical figure (*The New Yorker's* cover-design character, reproduced at the head of this article) a personal property tax bill.

Ross dislikes the radio as much as he likes poker. Years ago Ring Lardner used *The New Yorker's* columns to inveigh against the networks for permitting God's air to be sullied with off-color gags and songs. The crusade delighted Ross, so much so that he has never been able to find a fit successor. *The New Yorker* comments on books, plays, sports, music, and half a dozen other activities, but to this day it carries no radio column.

Nor does it run a Washington column, though it regularly publishes letters from London, Paris, and other cities. Ross hates Washington. During the war he became convinced that such agencies as the Office of War Information were conspiring to hire away all his bright young men. (He was largely correct.) To Ross, all American politicians, of whatever party, are blockheads. As for the bright young men, it took Ross years to reconcile himself to their being so



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frequently "college men." In the early days, he seemed to prefer desk-pounders. He would beam when he got a man who could really pound. Yet staff members used to bet that the harder a man pounded, the sooner Ross would grow to dislike him. Certainly there are no desk-pounders around the magazine now.

These dislikes, however, seem mild when set against his deep hatred of vulgarity—not profanity, which is a different matter. *The New Yorker* is not consistently interesting; its tone is becoming more and more uniform; it is not turning up new writers as often as it used to. But one thing must be said of it: it is, by any lights except those of the bluenose, in good taste. That good taste is today an integral part of Ross and his editors, although in Ross's case it may have been bred chiefly through trying his ideas on the public and watching the reaction.

By and large, *The New Yorker* may be considered a family magazine, except for an occasional blue cartoon by Peter Arno or one of his school. Yet even concerning Arno, two reservations must be made. First, *The New Yorker* has never yet printed a cartoon that was not much funnier than it was dirty. There is never dirt for dirt's sake. Secondly, it must be remembered that, though *The New Yorker* is a family magazine, the family is of a very special kind, one that is cheerful about sex rather than dismayed by it.

Ross is no prude; but, on the other hand, he has an infallibly negative reaction to what is truly vulgar. Over at *Life*, the editors sometimes ask themselves anxiously if enough "sex and grue" have been provided for a forthcoming issue. The "grue" stands for gruesome: a layout about a headless baby, an X-ray of a human stomach filled with nails, a horse which is half cow, a man with a sword stuck through his midriff. But Ross recoils from the mention of blood. "Oooh!" he scribbled across the proof of a profile which contained a faint trace of gore.

It is not social consciousness,



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but Ross's hatred of vulgarity that makes of *The New Yorker* a persistent if gentle-voiced crusader against sham, dishonesty, pomposity, the phony world of advertising enthusiasm and oily commercial crassness. One of his editors remembers seeing on Ross's desk a newspaper advertisement that bumbled about "our friendly bank" where any citizen, however humble, was welcome to "consult any of our vice presidents about his will, estate, or other problems." Ross had scrawled across the page: "But could I cash a \$5 check there?"

His complaints about the people who work for him are loud, owing to what must be the peculiar construction of his vocal chords, but they are really only half-hearted. He thinks the staff is too big—there are around 100 in the editorial department—but he shrinks from firing anybody and usually takes a year or two to do so.

The magazine is, of course, staffed by able, industrious editors who have survived through trial and error. His chief assistant, handling the "facts department," is William Shawn. Shawn started with the magazine in the '30s as a checker, or researcher, and ran the "intelligence desk," an oddly military way of describing the job of reading other publications for reprintable oddities, errors, and the like. The office legend is that Shawn's associates, rather than Ross, were the first to recognize his ability and to suggest his promotion to managing editor. "What qualification in hell has he for the job?" Ross is said to have demanded. The question has long been answered: a large part of *The New Yorker's* effect can be credited to Shawn, who is very quiet and practically always right. It was Shawn who suggested that an entire issue be given over to a single article—John Hersey's "Hiroshima"—to the exclusion of all other text or pictures. Offhand it is hard to recollect any parallel to this in periodical history. Ross had, of course, been consulted on this plan and was greatly pleased when it created something of a sensation.



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Another of Ross's more remarkable lieutenants is Katharine, wife of E. B. White. A sensitive critic, Boston-bred, she is Ross's barometer of good taste; source, perhaps, of the delicacy of tone that marks the magazine.

Members of the magazine's editorial staff—and some of them are almost as extraordinary as Ross himself—consider him a genius, a word they otherwise rarely employ.

He is a freak genius, a super-intelligent lowbrow. But his men resent the romantic notion that Ross does everything by intuition, or without hard and fast reasoning back of most of his judgments. They feel a certain split between Ross as person and Ross as editor; but they find it hard to reduce him to any formula. They respect him mainly because he respects them; because he does not throw his weight around; because, for all his rages and profanity and rudeness, he knows what he wants and why; because he is an *editor*, not a Führer, a power-maniac, or a pseudo-philosopher.

Ross has never allowed his name to appear on the masthead, declines to read anything written about himself, and protested vigorously, though not unamiably, when told that the present article was in prospect. One wonders, however, how his modesty was affected by the comment of a favorite aunt whom he visited during a trip west in the '30s. When the old lady asked him what he was doing now, Ross replied that he was running *The New Yorker*. She beamed, and said, "That's fine. Do send me a copy of your little paper sometime."

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**Henry F. Pringle**, alumnus of Frank Munsey's *New York Evening Sun*, wrote profiles for the early *New Yorker*. Later his biography of Theodore Roosevelt was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. This article is the first of two parts: the second will appear next month.