

ROSS OF THE NEW YORKER



Who he? A pro(and con)file of the editor
from Aspen

By HENRY F. PRINGLE

NOT LONG after *The New Yorker* had become a solid financial success, a cow-licked alien from Aspen (Colorado), Atlanta, New Orleans, Salt Lake City, and other points in the hinterlands was shuffling morosely through the throng at a brassy Manhattan cocktail party. A superb elegant, the very model of a modern Eustace Tilley, bent over his companion, and, with a nod in the direction of the outlander, murmured: "They ask the oddest characters in nowadays. See that chap over there? People ask me to believe he's Harold Ross of *The New Yorker*!"

Not to keep you in suspense, the odd character was Harold W[allace] Ross, editor of what many consider the most civilized magazine in this country.

The New Yorker's circulation is roughly 300,000, but its influence is just about what the editors of the really big magazines like to think *their* influence is. Not merely does it set fashions; it creates and changes ideas. It has produced a whole school of writers and cartoonists. In the last seven

OldMagazineArticles.com

Ross of The New Yorker

years alone it has given birth to more than 100 books. Its short stories are often, though less frequently of late, among the most distinguished in the language. Its "profiles" have radically changed periodical biographical writing. From the standpoint of any close student of our culture, its editor, therefore, rates as one of the most important men in the country. One can hardly wonder, then, that our elegant Eustace Tilley at the cocktail party should have refused to believe a gangling, ungainly, parade-ground-voiced yokel could possibly be Harold Ross.

Yet, though Ross has been the editor for more than twenty-three years, our young exquisite's indignation was not entirely uncalled-for. Ross is a kind of impostor. *The New Yorker* is urbane; cactus is more urbane than Ross. *The New Yorker* carries understatement almost to the point of inaudibility; with Ross the expletive crowds out most of the eight parts of speech. *The New Yorker* is supposed to be supermetropolitan; in a manner, Ross is still gapping at the sights along Fifth Avenue. He sends his Stanley to ride on the Third Avenue El, to visit Central Park's polar bears, to investigate the rats on Riker's Island, and in spirit he is right there along with Stanley.

This modicum of rubber in the neck of one of the country's greatest magazine editors is a secret of his success. A native New Yorker, swimming in the goldfish bowl, regards the other fish with a certain languor. Not so Ross. His eyes slightly abulge, he stares into the bowl, and perceives some very odd fish indeed. Of that restless, exact, goggle-eyed vision some 1,200 issues of *The New Yorker* have been born thus far.

Few things or people fail to impress the weekly's editor. He never pretends he knew it all

Ross of The New Yorker

along. "Never heard of him." "Never heard of it." "What's that?" These are questions very frequently on his lips. When one of his writers tosses in a reference to display his learning, Ross notes on the margin of the galley proof: "Who he?" "What that?" Generally the writer realizes the reference is either unclear or unnecessary, and sheepishly deletes it. The resultant clarity helps to make *The New Yorker* the best-written magazine in the country. Its columns are continually used as models in high school and college English classes, many instructors having discovered that more can be learned from them than from Robert Louis Stevenson or Thomas Babington Macaulay. (Query from Ross: *Who he?*)

The insistence on absolute clarity occasionally has its drawbacks, for it may drive into a wordless fury those of his writers who, unlike Ross, have suffered the disaster of a sound education. What can the poor scrivener do whose timid reference to, let us say, Marshal Ney is subject to Ross's irate challenge? Another consequence of the doctrine of clarity is that genuinely abstruse or complicated subjects must be avoided. A *New Yorker* profile of a mathematician will always tell you where he gets his clothes, but not necessarily where he gets his formulas. If people can't understand it, Ross will decree (people = Ross), then to hell with it.

The editor of *The New Yorker* cannot be explained, of course, merely by the insertion of wisps of hay into that stubborn hair through which every mother in the land would ache to run a comb. It is true that he never had a high school education; but it is also true that he is a master grammarian, and that the superb sense of

Ross of *The New Yorker*

style which informs *The New Yorker* flows in part from his clean, uncompromising feeling for the English language. Ross would froth at the mouth if he were accused of being so anemic a thing as a sensitive prose artist; yet he will hold up copy for hours, wrangling over a word, or the disposition of a comma; or he will effect a tiny miracle of humor through an alteration in a cartoon caption.

Pondering over the Ross mystery, one of his writers hazards that the major part of his boss's education has been gleaned by a careful reading of every word written by a generation of *New Yorker* writers. It is certainly true that the editor from Aspen reads few books. A book reviewer who worked for him for almost ten years recalls his being enthusiastic about only two titles discussed in the review columns during that period. One was *The Science of Life* by H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley, and G. P. Wells, an admiration quite in line with his passion for facts. The other dealt learnedly with the habits of fish.

Whatever the level of Ross's culture, he has managed to seduce into his pages dozens of the best-educated writers of the time, including H. L. Mencken, Rebecca West, Edmund Wilson, Lewis Mumford, E. B. White, and Janet Flanner ("Genêt").

For years Ross has been baffled by the poetry reviews in his columns (probably he has never voluntarily read a line of verse in his life) but here, as in the case of some of the book reviews, he has foregone his usual demand for utter clarity. The book review section of *The New Yorker* has been and occasionally still is of extremely "highbrow" and even opaque quality. When he engaged a book critic more than a decade

Ross of The New Yorker

ago he did so grudgingly: "People say we've got to have one." For a while he wavered between hiring a top-drawer critic or "a debutante"; he couldn't find a debutante, so he took on a "high-brow." But he did not interfere in or object to what the reviewer, however stratospheric, wrote, except once. The objection was raised when, in a review of Matthew Josephson's *The Robber Barons*, the bookman commented that those loud and greedy swindlers must have been dull fellows. On the contrary, said Ross irately, they were precisely the kind of men he would most like to invite to dinner.

In 1918, when Private Harold Ross was the editor of *Stars and Stripes*, he looked, as an old friend, the artist C. Le Roy Baldrige, has put it, "like a sketch roughed out in cement by Gutzon Borglum." Today he has not changed much. His mouth is a highly mobile cavernous opening; his teeth do not irritate you by their perfection; his grin is at once charming and alarming. His hair needs a full-time manager. He moves with a kind of ungainly vigor, somehow giving the impression of power without the slightest impression of grace. Harold Ross is no pretty boy and looks quite unlike the smooth, whiskey-ad, gentlemen-editors who adorn Rockefeller Center.

His manner is brusque, hard-boiled, apparently bare of sentiment. He has, however, plenty of tender feeling for Aspen, the Colorado silver town where he was born on November 6, 1892. He derives great satisfaction from Aspen's recent revival, as a skiing and fishing resort. Last summer, Lochinvar Ross returned home and was photographed, grinning his snaggle-toothed grin, with surviving old-timers.

Actually, Aspen saw little of the

OldMagazineArticles.com

Ross of The New Yorker

youthful Ross. His father, George, was one of the many who failed to strike it rich in the silver mines. The family soon moved to Salt Lake City, where the elder Ross worked at trades ranging from contractor to butcher. There was never much money and Harold had to do odd jobs while still in high school.

The boy was precocious. In *Who's Who in America* which, unlike *The New Yorker*, politely accepts what it's told, Ross lists himself as a reporter on the *Salt Lake City Tribune* at 14, on the *Marysville (Calif.) Appeal* when 18. The next year, he says, he was working for the *Sacramento Union*. He certainly had an itching foot, having been employed in rapid succession on the *Panama Star and Herald*, the *New Orleans Item*, and the *Atlanta Journal*. But by 1915 he was back in California with the *San Francisco Call*, where he hung up a personal record by staying two years.

Ross seems to have been a first-rate reporter. He had a faculty for "making news," a talent pleasing to city editors on the dull mornings when men neglect to bite dogs. In New Orleans one day he noticed some nudes carved on the doorway of a popular saloon. Nobody had ever paid the slightest attention to them, but Ross assembled some upright ladies who became properly indignant and issued sizzling protests. Business at the gin-mill boomed—and the paper got read.

When he was first running *The New Yorker*, journalistic enterprise of this sort would occasionally crop out in Ross. He would suggest that some writer undertake a blistering exposé of a Tammany leader or other dubious character. Had writers obeyed his fleeting urge as a crusader, however, the chances are excellent that Ross

Ross of The New Yorker

would have turned down the pieces. Purely muckraking exposés have never been published in *The New Yorker*. On the other hand, Ross has permitted contributors to do a prodigious amount of work in documenting the inaccuracies of Walter Winchell or in analyzing the *Reader's Digest*.

Harold Ross's editorial career really got under way during World War I. In an impulsive moment, while in San Francisco, he had joined an engineer outfit of the National Guard. When war was declared, he was surprised to find himself in the army, and was shipped off to France, where his record was strictly noncombatant. Private Ross was the original Sad Sack. His blouse was always unbuttoned. His spiral puttees kept descending. His fellow warriors were convinced he would end in Leavenworth, at best, and more probably before a firing squad.

From this dire fate Ross may have been saved by the decision of the War Department to boost morale by starting an army newspaper, theoretically to be written and edited by soldiers. (It did succeed in being written and edited by theoretical soldiers.) The first issue of *Stars and Stripes*, published in Paris, came out on February 8, 1918. Three weeks later the name of Private Harold W. Ross appeared on the masthead. Other current or future luminaries included Franklin P. Adams, whom Ross still calls "Sarge"; Grantland Rice; and Augustus E. Giegengack, later Public Printer of the United States. George T. Bye, now peacefully living off writers as a literary agent, was the London correspondent. Of this youthfully brash and disorderly group, the late Alexander Woollcott (who at the time prophesied

Ross of The New Yorker

that Ross would become New York's foremost editor) was perhaps the most picturesque. His relations with Ross were then mildly combative, quite as they were destined to be in the days ahead, when Woollcott was writing for *The New Yorker* and attempting to insinuate—or so Ross complained—off-color stories into his copy.

With the Armistice, Ross lost interest in the *Stars and Stripes*, obtained his discharge abroad, and came home, a civilian, in the spring of 1919. Shortly thereafter he met former War Secretary Newton D. Baker at some function and questioned him exhaustively on their common great experience. Baker was discursive and frank, and when the conversation ended, Ross said, "Well, Mr. Secretary, that cleans up everything except how Joe Higgins was made corporal of my squad."

A somewhat pointless five years as editor of the *American Legion Magazine* followed. In 1924, he became editor of the tottering *Judge*, then a humorous weekly, and began to learn the techniques of producing a magazine. But he was not cut out to work for somebody else.

By this time, largely because of his *Stars and Stripes* friendships with F.P.A. and Woollcott, Ross was moving in the plush circle of which Neysa McMein, the artist, was the undisputed high priestess. Thus he came to know the scintillating wits of the Algonquin Hotel's "round table."

It was during these lighthearted days, apparently, that the original idea of *The New Yorker* sprang into life behind Ross's brow. The basic circulation formula ("Not for the old lady from Dubuque") and the basic editorial pattern

Ross of The New Yorker

were not at first clear to him. Originally Ross thought of *Punch*, the British humor magazine, as his model. He rented a few small cubicles at 25 West 45th Street, heaped magazines from all over the world on long tailors' tables, and went to work.

If, as is doubtful, a basic magazine approach emerged from his studies at this point, it was to mirror the times we live in, focusing upon New York City as the concentrated expression of America. In his more philosophical moments, Ross conceived of his magazine as a serial history; in his more practical ones, he was ready at any time to rip an unsuccessful idea apart and try something else.

Armed with his concept, he looked around for suitable writers and artists and found most of them to his right and left at the Algonquin. Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, George S. Kaufman, Marc Connelly, and the late Alice Duer Miller were his first contributors and editorial mentors. In any event, their names were listed as Advisory Editors in the first issue, February 21, 1925.

The results were distressing, partly because these stars, however bright, were not prolific or versatile enough to fill fifty-two issues interestingly each year. As one of his associates has put it, "It was like opening a restaurant and depending on your friends." The art in the early issues—Rea Irvin and Gardner Rea had brought a fresh note to cartoons—was not bad. But, in general, Ross faced the necessity of developing a new kind of writer—the *New Yorker* writer. Either he had to find him, or create him. He has done both.

At first Ross had the notion that reporters on the metropolitan

Ross of The New Yorker

from the stories they covered, and that these could be bought cheaply. Notices appeared on city room bulletin boards appealing for such contributions. Most of the newsmen were too uninterested to send them in. Many thought the magazine would soon fold anyway. Ross learned that he would have to go out after his own material—and that this would be more costly than he had thought.

The infant weekly may have been born with an editorial monocle but, financially, its silver spoon was thinly plated. Originally \$45,000 had been put up, \$20,000 by Ross and \$25,000 by Raoul H. F. Fleischmann, who may have figured that the magazine business was bound to be more interesting than the bakery and grocery trade. The original backers had the rosy-edged idea that the business could be made to go on less than \$100,000. By April of 1925 nothing was left of the idea—or the money. The \$45,000 had lasted six weeks.

Over the next eight months Fleischmann put in another \$215,000; his wife (now Mrs. Peter Vischer) came in for \$60,000; and a few others, including R. H. Truax, the company's present treasurer, contributed smaller sums, totalling perhaps \$15,000. Half of the notes were taken in stock and the corporation allowed to repay the balance over the years. Between the end of 1925 and the beginning of 1927, further capital was invested against notes: \$310,000 by Fleischmann, \$40,000 by his wife, and another \$40,000 by a friend as a loan against accounts receivable. In short, the total amount of money invested in or loaned to the magazine was \$725,000. By the end of 1927 *The New Yorker* was in the black and has stayed there ever since. It started on an initial investment of

Ross of The New Yorker

\$45,000; the total market value of the stock today is \$4,500,000. As magazines go, this is a record of brilliantly economical and brilliantly successful financing. Today The New Yorker Magazine, Inc., successor to the F-R Publishing Co. (F-R meaning Fleischmann-Ross), is not "big" in the same terms as the Luce or Curtis enterprises, but it is more than well off.

There was, however, one dark Friday, in April 1925, when things looked hopeless. At 11 A.M. on that day, Fleischmann, Ross, Truax, and John Hanrahan (at that time publisher's consultant) met at the Princeton Club, looked at each other, and decided to quit. They were walking up Madison Avenue two by two, when, through a lull in the traffic, Fleischmann heard Hanrahan's high voice saying plaintively, "Well, I can't blame Raoul for killing the magazine, but it's like killing something alive."

It happened that on that same black Friday, Franklin P. Adams was scheduled to be married. At the wedding Fleischmann and Ross met again. Perhaps the hopeful atmosphere of orange blossoms and old shoes was too much for Fleischmann. At any rate, he told Ross that he felt he could not go through with his decision and would talk with him again on Monday, which he did. Fleischmann believes that if he hadn't seen Ross again that same day, he would have stuck to his original bleak resolve. We therefore owe *The New Yorker's* existence to F.P.A.'s forethought in getting married at the right time.

The early days were decidedly rocky. At one time in the summer of 1925 an issue ran with advertising worth exactly \$52.50, which the magazine didn't collect. Nevertheless, by December it had contracts totalling 1,332 pages for

Ross of The New Yorker

1926, and in the course of that year actually carried 1,801 $\frac{2}{3}$ pages. By 1929 the weekly had hit its all time high of 3,225 pages. *The New Yorker's* original advertising rate was \$150 a page; the basic page rate for general advertising in the nation-wide edition (there's a special New York City edition) is now \$1,800.

As to circulation, the first issue had a distribution of about 12,500 copies. By the end of 1925, the total average net paid circulation was 25,075. It has grown steadily year by year. Today it is over 300,000. Of this, 70 per cent is outside greater New York—which will surprise only those who have failed to note the gradual extension, beyond city limits, of the magazine's field of vision. It may also surprise Harold Ross, who from the start insisted upon putting the magazine on sale in New York as soon as it came off the presses, letting the old lady in Dubuque wait a few days longer for the same issue. About two-thirds of the circulation is subscription, the balance newsstand. The subscription list could be upped by pushing it, but more circulation would mean higher advertising rates. In the management's view, the normally acquired circulation has nicely balanced the page rates that advertisers are willing to pay. Right now it is 40,000 more than guaranteed. At any rate, since its early days, *The New Yorker* has not engaged in any big promotion campaigns.

There are many beautiful legends about these early days, one of them being that on November 26, 1925, the magazine was saved singlehanded by the daughter of the late Clarence H. Mackay, Ellin, later Mrs. Irving Berlin. It is true that on that day the front page of the *New York Times* carried a story saying that Miss Mac-

Ross of The New Yorker

Social Register. Typical were the youths of the stag lines, "pale-faced . . . each exactly like the other." "We have privacy in a cabaret," she added sternly.

The piece did create a mild sensation throughout the country, probably drew in some advertising, and focused attention on the struggling magazine. But it did not, as is frequently said, "make the magazine overnight." On magazines nothing happens overnight. The Mackay article, cut along the lines Ross had laid down in his own mind, was a brightly written job—and would doubtless be rejected by him today.

What *did* make the magazine, and to a large extent still makes it, is Harold Ross. He flies into a rage (one of the shortest flights on record) when his own share in the success of *The New Yorker* is exaggerated by the legend-makers; but there is considerable question whether, if Ross retired, the magazine wouldn't promptly follow suit. Of course, *The New Yorker* has been published when Ross was away on vacation. It remains a matter of record, however, that he began to edit a successful publication only when he abandoned the *Punch* idea of having a group of friends as advisory editors and became what he is today, the unquestioned arbiter of every line and picture in every issue. Names have come and gone without affecting the magazine's standing. The "typical" *New Yorker* writers, such as James Thurber, E. B. White, Wolcott Gibbs, did not join the staff until after the magazine had been well established.

Ross's passion for accuracy and his almost mad interest in detail account in large part for the standard *The New Yorker* has set in American journalism. No other

Ross of The New Yorker

magazine anywhere in the world, so far as is generally known, is so meticulously checked. A factual error, to Ross, is far worse than the sin against the Holy Ghost. A mistake or blunder can send him into a towering rage, and may be in part responsible for his ulcers. These he nurses with a kind of affectionate ire. He hopes to write a cookbook for ulcer sufferers someday; and in the meantime sticks to eggs so soft they are apt to make his table companions queasy. Many of his colleagues think the ulcers are disappearing or have disappeared, but they are probably afraid to tell him so.

Ross's mania for accuracy can be traced back to the very first issue. For that issue Marc Connelly had done a piece about the theatre in which he wrote that New York audiences will laugh "at the drop of a ha." Ross was in terror lest the proofreader ruin the pun by innocently changing the *ha* to *hat*. On press night (this was Issue Number One, remember, and the atmosphere was heavily charged) Ross gave a stern lecture to the proofreader on *ha* vs. *hat*. The presses were to start rolling at midnight. Promptly at midnight Ross crawled into them at the risk of his neck, held up a match under the roller, and, reading the plate backwards, made sure it was *ha*. He shook hands with himself, went home, slept well, went to the office in the morning, and opened an early copy.

His hair, already on end, could rise no further. The copy read *hat*. He had forgotten to brief the A.M. proofreader, who had come in shortly after the presses had started, caught the *ha*, stopped the presses, broke the form, and conscientiously made the word *hat*.