

Meet Mr. Mencken

By SYDNEY A. MAYERS

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"The study of H. L. Mencken and his world will never be a closed book."

— RICHARD HART

I am rather astonished nowadays by the response I often meet when I refer to H. L. Mencken. Particularly among younger folk, the reaction to my mention of his name seems to be an expression of questioning ignorance, a sort of "Mencken? Who he?" Such a lack of familiarity towards one who, in addition to other notable qualities, was perhaps the most brilliant man of letters of his time, I find deeply distressing. Especially poignant is the fact that "his time" ended not very long ago. While I recognize the inexorable application of *Sic Transit Gloria Mundi*, to me Mencken is one of the immortals we must not let be relegated to the category of the all-but-forgotten.

It may be somewhat droll to speak of Henry Louis Mencken as "immortal," for surely no one was ever more "mortal." He was truly earthy, an almost incredibly vital and vigorous human being, who lived and worked and loved and hated with tremendous gusto. Though the keenest of intellectuals, he rollicked through life with a zest for enjoyment worthy of Rabelais (who is probably his boon companion in the less dignified precincts of the Valhalla they now share). Yet each side of Mencken's nature nourished and enhanced the other, and as a result, his intellectuality was deliciously spiced with warmth and wit, while his hedonism consistently reflected taste and discernment.

Mencken was an amazingly prolific writer, even for one whose productive career began in 1899, when he was barely nineteen, and continued without interruption until his last years. (He died, untimely, in 1956, at the age of 75.) The definitive bibliography of his work, compiled by Betty Adler in 1961, requires 367 pages of compact type-set to list his literature output — and Miss Adler modestly explains that certain items, for various reasons, could not be included! He wrote many books, countless magazine articles, hundreds of newspaper columns, a volume of poetry (when he was very young), and a couple of plays to boot. He was a superb literary critic, and a master of the short paragraph, which he

turned out by the score, every one a pithy gem of pungent wit.

However, what intrigues one about H. L. M. is not how *much* he wrote, but how *well* he wrote. To read his *Prejudices*, of which he wrote six volumes; his autobiographical books; his *Chrestomathy*, a self-selected anthology, or indeed any of his writings, is to bask gloriously in the products of a scintillating mind and an extraordinarily gifted pen. His command of words, his idiomatic dexterity, and his trenchant style give his writing a dazzling quality — so dazzling that it sometimes almost blinds the reader to the thought conveyed. No wonder Mencken himself wrote: "To the man with an ear for verbal delicacies — the man who searches painfully for the perfect word, and puts the way of saying a thing above the thing said — there is in writing the constant joy of sudden discovery, of happy accident."

Mencken's greatest work was (and is) *The American Language*, a linguistic masterpiece of gigantic proportions, to which he devoted long years of research and study. First published in 1919, it was revised three times during the ensuing eighteen years, Mencken blandly remarking in 1936 that he thought he would "call it a day." Nevertheless, he further amplified the treatise with a *Supplement* in 1945, and another in 1948, each in itself a sizable volume. It is a major achievement, not only because of its intrinsic excellence, but even more so because it is a supremely scholarly work and yet was produced by a non-scholar, a true *amateur*. In any case, it has attained the status of standard reference, and remains a monument to Mencken's peculiar genius.

Though he recognized *The American Language* as his *magnum opus*, Mencken always considered himself primarily a newspaperman, and was prouder of this calling than of any other he followed. Even when his duties as a magazine editor (first of *Smart Set* and later of *The American Mercury*) necessitated spending a great deal of time in New York, he maintained his domicile in Baltimore, and continued to write for The Baltimore Sun. His tenure on that famous journal spanned a period of close to fifty years, although it was twice interrupted by a characteristically Menckenic gesture. Being stoutly (and quite outspokenly)

opposed to America's participation in both World Wars, he severed his association with The Sun during these conflicts, to avoid "embarrassing" its publishers.

His was not a simple character, and yet its many facets were tied together by a single thread, a basic probity of principle and purpose that prompted his every utterance. (Eric Partridge, the noted British philologist, said of H. L. M. that he was "compact of honesty and honor, and of an immaculate integrity.") When asked to set forth his fundamental beliefs, Mencken replied: "I believe, and preach, three main doctrines: that it is better to tell the truth than to lie; that it is better to be free than a slave; that it is better to have knowledge than be ignorant." Perhaps it was this upright philosophy that engendered his slam-bang attack on any form of humbug he encountered. He was a self-appointed, practicing iconoclast; scathingly intolerant of the false, the hypocritical, and the meretricious, all of which he denounced with a unique flair for flaying adjectives. Sometimes he was brutal, sometimes whimsical, but he was always effective; and withal usually softened the sting of his barbs with wry humor. "If you find so much that is unworthy of reverence in the United States," someone demanded, "then why do you live here?" "Why do men go to zoos?" was Mencken's reply.

Mencken was accused of being bitter (which he wasn't) and of being a cynic (which, of course, he was). He was intelligently happy, and it takes a cynic to be a happy person. Expecting little of value, and skeptical of life at best, the cynic heartily embraces such joys as are available to him in a not-too-joyous world. So it was with H. L. M. He gloried in *gemutlichkeit*, and partook lustily of good conversation (preferably stimulating and provocative), good music (preferably stirring and Teutonic), and good beverage (preferably choice and potent). His hatred of Prohibition was a majestic emotion, since he considered spirits a basic necessity, serving both as an inspiration and as a reward for worthwhile literary efforts. His policy on the subject was clearly stated: "I've made it a rule never to drink by daylight and never to refuse a drink after dark." (According to Peter Buitenhuis, "Mencken held firmly to the opinion that a man who didn't drink couldn't write.")