

Mencken, H. L. (12 Sept. 1880-29 Jan. 1956), author, editor, and journalist, was born Henry Louis Mencken in Baltimore, Maryland, the son of August Mencken, a cigar manufacturer, and Anna Abhau. Having emigrated from Germany during the mid-nineteenth century, the Menckens and Abhaus had quickly adapted to life in the United States, and they provided a home more Victorian than German-American for their four children. Henry Mencken, the eldest, did attend a private German school for his earliest education, but he completed his formal education at Baltimore Polytechnic, a high school primarily responsible for producing engineers and technicians.

From the beginning, Mencken was more interested in reading and writing than in applied science, and in his teens he began to write poetry and short stories. He had wanted to become a newspaper reporter after his graduation from Polytechnic, but as a dutiful son he accepted instead a position in his father's now flourishing cigar factory. The two years he spent at Aug. Mencken & Bro. were the most miserable of his young life, and he found release from the work only at the sudden death of his father when he was eighteen.

Within two weeks of his father's death Mencken had applied for a position on the Baltimore *Herald*, and within three months he was a cub reporter. Thus began a meteoric rise to police and city hall reporter, city editor, managing editor, and, at age twenty-five, editor of the *Herald*. In 1906 he took a position as Sunday editor of the Baltimore *Sun*, and soon he gained local fame as a columnist and editorial writer.

Meanwhile, Mencken contributed poetry and stories to national magazines and at age twenty-two published a volume of poetry, *Ventures into Verse* (1903). That volume was inconsequential, but two other works published within the next five years were to gain recognition and praise. *George Bernard Shaw: His Plays* (1905) and *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908) launched Mencken as literary and social critic and intellectual historian.

In 1908 Mencken also became literary editor of the *Smart Set*, a New York monthly he would serve for the next fifteen years, six as book reviewer and nine as coeditor, along with drama critic [George Jean Nathan](#). Mencken first gained a national audience as *Smart Set* editor, and with his magazine columns and his "Free Lance" column in the Baltimore *Evening Sun* he found his style and his voice--irreverent, hyperbolic, outrageous. His chief targets were those he was to pursue over the next decade--puritanism, Anglo-Saxons (both in England and in the United States), the English cultural tradition, the American Genteel Tradition in literature, and particularly the American hinterlands, notably the South.

In the early years of World War I Mencken vigorously promoted the German cause, but when the United States entered the war he was silenced by his newspaper and by magazines for which he had written. He used the time to write on other subjects. In *A Book of Prefaces* (1917) he attacked the literary status quo in the United States, blasted professors and puritans and poetasters, and championed such writers as [Theodore Dreiser](#) who were challenging traditional Anglo-American literary assumptions. He also produced *In Defense of Women* (1918), a witty discussion of relations between the sexes, and the first edition of *The American Language* (1919), a work that drew on his growing interest in the differences between British and American English.

After the war was over, Mencken was ready to burst forth with an indictment of American life unprecedented in his--or any other writer's--career. His six-volume collection of essays, aptly titled *Prejudices* (1919-1927), scrutinized and often ridiculed American values, politics, religion, education, literature--in short, nearly every aspect of American life. His satires of politicians, professors, preachers, businessmen, and the average "boobus Americanus" gained him enemies in abundance, and he welcomed and enjoyed the battle that ensued. His prose was scintillating, as in his classic indictment of the American South, "The Sahara of the Bozart":

Nearly the whole of Europe could be lost in that stupendous region of fat farms, shoddy cities and paralyzed cerebrums . . . And yet, for all its size and all its wealth and all the "progress" it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert. (*Prejudices*, vol. 2 [1920], p. 136)

It was not only the South that Mencken decried; he also derided New England (the ancestral home of Puritanism) and the Midwest and California (the land of quacks, he believed). He satirized Rotarians and Elks and Methodists and Christian Scientists, and he ridiculed presidents. He detested [Woodrow Wilson](#) for his moralism, but Mencken was equally critical of (if less passionate about) [Warren G. Harding](#), [Calvin Coolidge](#), and [Herbert Hoover](#). Mencken's influence was enormous in the 1920s. "The most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people," [Walter Lippmann](#) pronounced Mencken in 1926, and any number of other commentators agreed.

Mencken was not only writer but also celebrity. When he traveled to Dayton, Tennessee, in July 1925 for the Scopes evolution trial, he was as much participant as reporter. His dispatches to the Baltimore *Evening Sun*, reprinted in dozens of other newspapers, portrayed Tennesseans as "gaping primates of the Cumberland slopes," and there was talk among the Fundamentalists of running him out of town. In fact, he left under his own steam, only to learn of the death of anti-evolutionist [William Jennings Bryan](#) a week later and to write, in an obituary essay on Bryan, one of the most savage indictments any American journalist had ever issued. Bryan, he charged, was a "walking malignancy . . . a vulgar and common man . . . ignorant, bigoted, self-seeking, blatant and dishonest . . .

deluded by a childish theology, full of an almost pathological hatred of all learning, all human dignity, all beauty, all fine and noble things. He was a peasant come home to the dung-pile" (Baltimore *Evening Sun*, 27 July 1925).

Mencken's primary forum after 1923 was the *American Mercury*, a magazine that he and Nathan founded and that he edited until 1933. It was through the *Mercury* that he reached tens of thousands of apostles and exerted his greatest influence. In the *Mercury* as well as in the earlier *Smart Set*, he published a number of writers whom he had discovered or encouraged--including [Sinclair Lewis](#), [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#), [Sherwood Anderson](#), [James Branch Cabell](#), and Theodore Dreiser--and was largely successful in establishing their brands of literary realism or naturalism and, in the process, putting romance and sentimentalism to rout.

By the late 1920s Mencken had largely tired of literary pursuits and had tired as well of his role as polemicist and public spectacle. He undertook a series of scholarly inquiries that were published as *Notes on Democracy* (1926), *Treatise on the Gods* (1930), and *Treatise on Right and Wrong* (1934). Having been influenced by Nietzsche, he was avowedly antidemocratic (he called himself a monarchist) and uncompromisingly agnostic, but such positions did not prevent him from being fascinated both by democracy and religion. His "serious" inquiries, however, did not fare so well critically as the satires and the polemical works of the 1920s.

By the early 1930s Mencken had fallen out of public favor, although the period from 1930 to 1935 was personally one of the most pleasant of his life. In 1930, just before his fiftieth birthday, he had married Sara Haardt, a writer from Montgomery, Alabama (one of those well-born southerners he preferred, despite his condemnation of the South), but what proved to be a happy marriage ended with Sara's death, at age thirty-seven, in May 1935. After her death Mencken found refuge in work, turning grimly and resolutely to another edition of *The American Language*, a work that occupied him in some manner for most of his adult life. With the publication of the massive fourth edition in 1936, he found that he was again in critical favor.

That favor increased with the publication of a trilogy of autobiographical works, *Happy Days* (1940), *Newspaper Days* (1941), and *Heathen Days* (1943), in which Mencken wrote about earlier, more pleasant years. Virtually an urban *Tom Sawyer* written seventy years after [Mark Twain](#)'s classic, *Happy Days* recounted his boyhood in Baltimore, a nearly ideal time as he depicted it. *Newspaper Days* and *Heathen Days* were works in the same vein, and Mencken's reputation, so low in the early 1930s that one critic referred to him as "the late Mencken," rose with each volume.

At the same time that he was remembering more carefree earlier days, Mencken was also keeping a darker record, one not intended for publication in his own lifetime, perhaps not intended for publication at all but which nonetheless saw print more than thirty years after his death as *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* (1989). He had begun the diary in 1930, had largely ceased writing in it after Sara's death in 1935, but had returned to it with a vengeance in the early 1940s. Again, in the early forties, he was silenced by war: again, he could not write on international affairs, so strong was his opposition to the pro-British stance of the *Sun* papers. In his diary he entered his displeasure with American life, with numerous friends and writers, with [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) (whom he also excoriated in print), and much else. Roosevelt, he wrote, was not only a betrayer of his class but also a fraud, a political snake-oil salesman. The country in general, he felt, was being taken over by bureaucrats and labor leaders. Internationally, although he abhorred Great Britain, he was forced to admit that the Germany he had loved was no more. At home, in Baltimore, friends were ill and dying, his own health was declining, his neighborhood was deteriorating, and the city he had loved was gone forever.

The diary was only one of Mencken's wartime occupations. He also labored over a personal newspaper history, "Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work," which he intended to be published long after his death, and "My Life as Author and Editor," a chronicle of his days as *Smart Set* editor and friend of Dreiser, Lewis, Fitzgerald, and other writers. His "Life as Author and Editor" was not to be published until 1993; "Thirty-Five Years," not until 1995.

After the Second World War Mencken continued to work on *The American Language*. In 1945 he produced a supplement to the 1936 edition and in 1948 another supplement. With the two additional volumes--which, together with the earlier editions, totaled some 3,800 pages--Mencken had solidified his position as the nation's most prominent popular philologist. Earlier he had been interested primarily in the ways in which British and American English had diverged. In the later volumes he maintained that they were drawing closer again, with "American" this time gaining the upper hand. His own preference for American over British English had always been clear: in his opinion, it was more descriptive, more vivid, more colorful.

In late 1948 Mencken's literary career came to a cruel end. The victim of several small strokes over the past decade, in November he suffered a massive stroke that robbed him of his ability to read and write. Although he would regain a measure of his physical health, he would never again regain those functions. *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, a work he had prepared just before the stroke, was published in 1949; it would be the last of his books published in his lifetime. Another book, *Minority Report*--an earlier manuscript found by his secretary in late 1955--appeared just after his death in Baltimore.

Minority Report was the first of a series of works that constitute the posthumous career of H. L. Mencken. Because such works as *My Life as Author and Editor* and *Thirty-five Years of Newspaper Work* were ordered, by Mencken's will, to be kept under lock and key until thirty-five years after his death, and because his diary was tied up for nearly as long, they did not appear in print until the late

1980s and early 1990s. When they did appear, they stirred up a curious kind of Mencken renaissance. "It will be nice being denounced again," Mencken had said shortly before the publication of *Minority Report*--and just three days before his death--and such was the case in the final decade of the century. The publication of the diary brought renewed charges of racism and anti-Semitism, and defenders were as vocal as critics. For a man with no conventional religious faith and no belief in the afterlife, such controversy was indeed a form of immortality.

Mencken's reputation, thus, is still in flux. From the beginning he was a difficult writer to categorize; in an American context he was nearly *sui generis*. His antecedents, if any, appeared to be European--Voltaire, Swift, Shaw, Nietzsche. The earlier American writer he most resembled was Mark Twain, and like Twain his reputation has been revised somewhat, has become darker, with the publication of his posthumous works.

But the Mencken works that will endure are not the *Diary* and *My Life as Author and Editor*, despite their interest. The enduring works will be the volumes of *Prejudices* of the 1920s, the editions of *The American Language* (particularly that of 1936), and the autobiographical *Days* books. If Mencken in his later years was a somewhat subdued soul, ill of health and possessed of a darker vision, the essential Mencken was the writer and editor of the 1920s--a man who damned America with all the relish and gusto (and even underlying affection) with which [Walt Whitman](#) had praised it, a man of whom Walter Lippmann once said, "He calls you a swine, and an imbecile, and . . . increases your will to live" (*Saturday Review*, 11 Dec. 1926, p. 414).

Bibliography

The vast majority of Mencken's letters, papers, and memorabilia is in the Enoch Pratt Free Library of Baltimore and the New York Public Library. On Mencken's life, see William Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace: The Life of H. L. Mencken* (1950); Carl Bode, *Mencken* (1969); and Fred Hobson, *Mencken: A Life* (1994); as well as *The Diary of H. L. Mencken*, ed. Charles A. Fecher (1989); *My Life as Author and Editor*, ed. Jonathan Yardley (1993); and *Thirty-five Years of Newspaper Work*, ed. Fred Hobson et al. (1995). For discussions of Mencken's work, see William Nolte, *H. L. Mencken: Literary Critic* (1966); Douglas C. Stenerson, *H. L. Mencken: Iconoclast from Baltimore* (1971); Fred Hobson, *Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South* (1974); Charles A. Fecher, *Mencken: A Study of His Thought* (1978); Edward A. Martin, *H. L. Mencken and the Debunkers* (1984); Charles Scruggs, *The Sage in Harlem: H. L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s* (1984); and Vincent Fitzpatrick, *H. L. Mencken* (1989).

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Online Resources

- H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices*, 1919
<http://metalab.unc.edu/docsouth/mencken/menu.html>
From the Documenting the American South Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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