

**THE
PRINTED
WORD**

An address by

J. R. WIGGINS

*Managing Editor of
The Washington Post*

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at the

**ANNUAL MEETING of the
MARYLAND LIBRARY ASSOCIATION**

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THE PRINTED WORD

Printers and librarians have had, since the beginning of printing, a close association. We are in fact members of the same profession.

I am aware of the danger of reaching too far in order to establish a convenient professional identification. During the debates in the House of Commons on the resolution setting up the Royal Commission on the Press, on October 29, 1946, Mr. Haydn Davies amusingly described how one ancient English trade identified itself with journalism. He said there was once a conference of journalists at one end of a town, while the fish fryers of Great Britain were meeting in conference at the other end of the town, and they sent this telegram to the journalists:

"Fraternal greetings to journalists by the fish fryers of Great Britain. Our work is wrapped up in yours."

I trust that I may say, much more appropriately, that as a newspaper editor, my work is wrapped up in yours and your work is wrapped up in mine; for both of us deal with the printed word. And it is idle to endeavor to discover which deals with it in the most important way. Suffice it to say that if the printed word is to be effective, some men must put type to paper and other men must put the paper thus printed into the hands of readers.

In spite of all the progress in communications, the printed word remains the primary means of linking mankind with man. It links each of us to the society about him, conferring on him a sense of identity, making his good and bad deeds known to the community and making the community censure or praise known and felt by him. Through the printed word we draw upon the knowledge gathered by all who have preceded us, upon the information obtained by

all who live about us. The printed word is our best hope of borrowing from the past, our best means of influencing the present, and our chief hope of gaining admission to that larger community which is our posterity.

As custodians of the printed word we have our troubles.

Benjamin Franklin, writing in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in June 10, 1731 listed some of them. He asked that all who were angry with him because of what he printed give consideration to several peculiarities of his trade, such as these:

"1. That the opinions of men are almost as various as their faces.

"2. That the business of printing has chiefly to do with men's opinions: Most things that are printed tending to promote some, or oppose others.

"3. . . . that they who follow printing (are) scarce able to do anything in their way of getting a living, which shall not probably give offence to some and perhaps to many. . . .

"4. That it is unreasonable in any one man or set of men to expect to be pleased with everything that is printed, as to think that nobody ought to be pleased but themselves.

"5. Printers are educated in the belief that when men differ in opinion both sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the public. . . .

"6. . . . they print things full of spleen and animosity with the utmost calm and indifference, and without the least ill will to the persons reflected on; who nevertheless unjustly think the printer as much their enemy as the author.

"7. . . . that it is unreasonable to imagine printers approve of everything they print, and to censure them on any particular thing accordingly.

"8. . . . that if all printers were determined not to print anything till they were sure it would offend nobody, there would be very little printed. . . ."

He might have included librarians in his list, for certainly, they are often blamed, as well as printers, for all the opinions in all the books upon their shelves. And their best answer to complainants is a paraphrase of Franklin's answer for printers . . . "if all librarians kept only books that they were sure would offend nobody, there would be very few books in any library."

Those who serve the printed word in libraries or in print shops or newspapers are accustomed to the strange hostility with which it is often greeted. Usually we try to be philosophic about it. Yet, when the ordinary hostility of those who have been given offense by printing, rises above the level of rancor for which our experience has conditioned us, we can ill suppress our anxiety. We know that the printed word cannot perform its functions in our society except in an ideal environment. Laws alone can not maintain this environment. The temper of the people is a part of it. A complex of many rights must co-exist unimpaired if the printed word is to be the effective agent of enlightenment. Men must have the right to discover the truth. They must have the right to print it without the prior restraint or pre-censorship of government. They must have access to printing materials. They must be able to print without fear of cruel or unusual punishment for publication alleged to be wrongful. They must have the right to put printed material into the hands of readers without obstruction by government, under cover of law, or obstruction by citizens acting in defiance of the law. Wherever these rights are threatened, the power of the printed word is incapable of performing its mission to mankind.

It is only in a free society, blessed with these particular rights, and enjoying the other liberties and freedoms we have acquired through so many centuries, that the printed word can work its benefactions. Such a free society, of course, has not always existed. Many of the rights upon which freedom depends have been challenged. It is the memory of these challenges that give us the uneasy anxiety that rises

spontaneously in us, up from our very subconscious, when we see these rights threatened in our own time.

Those who deal with the printed word are least of all "an island unto themselves." Their freedoms are inseparably linked with the liberties essential to the fruitful functioning of other professions devoted to the discovery and dissemination of truth, as well as to those freedoms common to all men. Our fate is of a piece with that of teachers, lawyers and clergymen. An attack upon our liberties is an attack upon the liberties of the whole people; and an attack upon the liberties of any man is an attack upon our liberties.

It is an appreciation of our identity with a past filled with the arduous struggle for liberty, our identity with those about us who share that liberty with us and with a posterity that depends upon us to keep it intact for them, that makes us properly anxious when any liberty is attacked.

When a congressional committee summons an editor before it and subjects him to hours of secret questioning and examination and interrogation, every man to whom the printed word is sacred must feel rising out of his cultural subconscious the warnings of history. The alarm bells of this anxiety set up their clamor at the first trespass. Little does it matter who the editor is or what are his opinions. Where those who print bad opinions (or opinions someone thinks are bad) are not safe, those who print good opinions are equally insecure. At the first signal of such invasion, the mind goes rushing back through the centuries to earlier examples of printers, summoned before the bar of the House of Commons in England; to editors harried from their homes by hostile Governor's councils and vengeful assemblies in the American colonies.

When the mighty power of Congress is focused upon an editor by a politician whose activities have been the object of the editor's persistent censure, how can we fail to recall the

numberless morbid examples and melancholy precedents of history.

In 1717 the House of Commons took into custody a printer and publisher who dared to print a remonstrance that the Netherlands made to Queen Anne, branding it a "false, scandalous and malicious libel."

In 1713, the Parliament of Ireland hailed Edward Lloyd before it for publishing a book entitled "Memoirs of Chevalier de St. George," a tract sympathetic to the family of the Pretender.

In 1713, John Morphew and John Barber were taken into custody by parliament for printing a libel entitled "The Public Spirit of the Whigs," which contained "severe reflections" on the union, the Scottish nation and the Duke of Argyle.

In 1713, Richard Steele was hailed before the House for writings that contained "insolent, injurious reflections on the queen" and he was expelled from the House despite a defense by Addison.

In 1740 one William Cooley was examined at the bar of the House and committed to prison, after having owned himself author of a paper entitled, "Considerations upon the embargo on provisions of victuals." The performance (says Smollett) contained many shrewd and severe animadversions upon the government, for having taken a step which, without answering the purpose of distressing the enemy, would prove a grievous discouragement to trade, and ruin all the graziers of Ireland.

In 1751 parliament voted that a paper entitled "Constitutional Queries" was a "false, malicious, scandalous, infamous and seditious libel, containing the most false, audacious and abominable calumnies and indignities upon his majesty, and the most presumptuous and wicked insinuations that our laws, liberties and properties, and the excellent constitution of this kingdom were in danger under his majesty's legal, mild and gracious government, with intent to

instil groundless suspicion and jealousies into the minds of his majesty's good subjects." Fortunately, the printer or publisher, who was destined for condign punishment, could not be found.

When public officials object to printed criticism of government or of their conduct, it is not difficult to recall the hardships that were imposed upon people and the curtailment of liberty that ensued when the view that such criticism was not allowable was widely held.

In 1680 the English courts took the view that the freedom from licensing did not extend to Gazettes, and held that "by the common law of England, no man, not authorized by the crown, had a right to publish political news."

Sir Roger L'Estrange, in 1663, held that a newspaper made the multitude too familiar with the actions and counsels of their superiors and gave them "not only an Itch but a colourable right to be meddling with Government."

Lord Chief Justice Scroggs, in 1679, held it criminal at the common law to "write on the subject of government, whether in terms of praise or censure, it is not material, for no man has a right to say anything of government."

These doctrines are not bluntly asserted today by anyone in public life; but the philosophy out of which these historic declarations emerged does not differ greatly from that responsible for congressional interrogation of hostile editors.

American experience with legislative bodies and governor's councils as the custodians of press freedom is not such as to inspire faith in lawmakers who summon writers, editors and printers before them. William Nuthead, in 1682, was summoned before the Governor's Council at Jamestown, Virginia, and bound over to stop printing the acts of the last session of the assembly "until the signification of his Majesty's pleasure shall be known." Lord Howard of Effingham arrived in 1684 with the word that "no person be permitted to use any press for printing upon any occasion whatsoever." He fled to Maryland.

James Franklin was summoned before the Governor's Council in Massachusetts for criticizing the government of that state.

William Bradford was called before the Governor's Council in Pennsylvania in 1689 for printing a version of Penn's charter.

As late as 1719 the Pennsylvania legislature warned Andrew Bradford "not to print anything again on government."

There is nothing in the history of parliamentary bodies, as judges of individual editors and printers, to inspire confidence in them as safe judges of freedom of the press. This is not to detract from their devotion to principles, nor from the benefits that they have conferred legislatively upon the freedom of expression. But in their transactions with individuals, they have exhibited a savagery that reached its peak in the treatment of John Twyn who was hanged, disemboweled and drawn and quartered in October 1663, for declaring that the people had an interest in the execution of justice; and in the exile in 1764 of John Wilkes, who dared report parliamentary proceedings and who criticized the King's message.

It is urged, of course, that it is a far cry from the agony of Twyn to the mere discomfiture, embarrassment and at most intimidation of an editor by interrogation before a congressional committee. And so it is a great distance. But every great fire starts as a small one. And no man who reads the history of our institutions with an open mind, needs to see an editor upon a gibbet, a printer under the axe, a writer in exile, to perceive the beginnings of legislative invasion of the freedom of the press.

And when members of Congress sit in judgment to decide what books may be appropriately left upon library shelves, other memories are stirred. As individuals we may be in agreement with members of congress on the faults and flaws of many literary works. We may deplore, as congressmen deplore, the inclusion of some publications on lists of books sent abroad as representative of our culture. But those with an

eye on the past can hardly fail to feel an instinctive anxiety about government in the role of book critic.

English parliaments for 200 years brought down upon themselves the ridicule of mankind by ordering offensive publications burned by the public hangman. In one solemn vote after another they ordered the ceremonious destruction of books that affronted the House, the King or the Church. The writers posterity has come to esteem as the ornaments of English literature variously shared this distinction, and even the works of Milton were consigned to official bonfires. There have been modern imitators of English precedents. The Nazis and the Fascists and the Communists all have gone in for book burnings.

Our government has not gone so far, and it is not likely to do so; but individuals in office have exhibited some disquieting inclinations toward the belief that ideas can be destroyed by moving against the printed words in which they are expressed.

However objectionable some political ideas may be, American citizens have a right to know about them; to form their own judgments of them; to arrive at their own devices for dealing with them. Ignorance is certainly not our refuge and our principles are not so poor and our philosophies so weak as to require the protection of censorship against the competition of rival philosophies or systems set forth in the printed word.

When congressional investigators, however well intentioned, invade with their inquiries the schools and churches (even though they interrogate only individual teachers and churchmen and not the institutions as such) other recollections are stirred.

It needs to be said parenthetically that even the good motive of a congressional committee (if it has good motives) is no assurance against bad consequences of its investigations. The English historian Macauley has wisely observed that "virtue itself may contribute to the fall of a

man who imagines that it is in his power by violating some general rule of morality to confer an important benefit on a church, on a commonwealth, on mankind. He silences the remonstrances of conscience, and hardens his heart against the most touching spectacles of misery, by repeating to himself that his intentions are pure, that his objects are noble, that he is doing a little evil for the sake of a great good. By degrees he comes altogether to forget the turpitude of the means in the excellence of the end, and at length perpetrates without one internal twinge acts which would shock a buccaneer."

There is good reason, in our memories, for feeling anxiety when government investigates the teacher and the clergyman. Even school-boys can remember from their texts that so great a man as John Locke was driven by a hostile government from the University of Oxford. Since the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Englishmen have feared government tribunals empowered to exercise control of churches and schools. Her Court of High Commission was long held the most grievous tribunal of her reign. In July 1686, James II determined to create another Court of High Commission, despite the fact that its very establishment was an outrageous violation of the law and a direct attack on the Church. As Macauley describes this investigating body:

"All colleges and grammar schools, even those founded by the liberality of private benefactors, were placed under the authority of the new board. All who depended for bread on situation in the Church or in academical institutions, from the vice chancellors of Oxford and Cambridge down to the humblest pedagogue who taught Corderius, were at the Royal mercy. If any one of the many thousands was suspected of doing or saying anything distasteful to the government, the commissioners might cite him before them. In their mode of dealing with him they were fettered by no rules. They were themselves at once prosecutors and judges. The

accused party was furnished with no copy of the charge. He was examined and cross examined. If his answers did not give satisfaction, he was liable to be suspended from his office, to be ejected from it, to be pronounced incapable of holding any preferment in future. If he were contumacious he might be excommunicated, or in other words, be deprived of all civil rights and imprisoned for life."

There is a contemporary ring to this description in inquisitorial power that ought to give us pause.

In 1687, James II created a visitatorial commission to exercise jurisdiction over Magdalene College at Oxford. Among the three Commissioners, it is interesting to note was Sir Thomas Jenner. These three commissioners turned out the duly constituted authorities of the college, with whom they disagreed on religion, and pronounced the ejected fellows incapable of ever holding any church preferment. It was an act of infamy that remains fresh in English minds these 250 years later.

There is in our traditions, many more such examples of political invasion of the rights of church and school and these instances alone are sufficient to stir the apprehensions of every historically literate citizen of the land whenever political authority presumes to sit in judgment on church or school.

When political leaders have the power to move against the church, they are in constant danger of being led into abuse of that power by men motivated by religious hates. Religious leaders are peculiarly vulnerable to the sort of conspiracy that one Robert Young attempted against the Bishop of Rochester in the reign of William and Mary in 1692. An accomplice of Young concealed in the home of the Bishop of Rochester a document containing the forged signatures of many associates of the Bishop, binding them to action against the King. The forgery was sufficiently plausible so that the Bishop was summoned before the privy council and questioned. He succeeded in establishing

his innocence. He set an example to the unjustly accused by his demeanor in examination, saying quietly: "I submit to the necessities of state in such a time of jealousy and danger as this." And when his ordeal was over he indignantly remarked to the man who had tried to have him impeached: "God give you repentance, for depend upon it, you are in much more danger of being damned than I am of being impeached." The Bishop quietly returned to his residence at Bromley.

In our time, we have also seen a Bishop unjustly accused. What malice filled the files of the Un-American Activities Committee with reckless and ill founded charges against G. Bromley Oxnam, we may never know. That so formidable a dossier could have been assembled against a man so innocent of the least affiliation with or sympathy for Communism is sufficient warning that innocence is no protection against this sort of damage. As long as congressional committees are willing to become the repository of libelous and scandalous charges against churchmen, there will be no lack of rogues to supply their files. The technique of destroying clergymen is about the same in 1953 as it was in 1692, and it scarcely recommends itself to Americans who value their free institutions or their independent churches.

There is not one man in a thousand in this country, nay one in 10,000, who would argue that disloyal persons ought to occupy either the teacher's rostrum or the preacher's pulpit; but neither is there one in 10,000 with any knowledge of our past who does not know that the ascertainment of the loyalty of teachers and clergymen is the proper responsibility of the governing boards of educational institutions and the constituted authorities of the church.

Every school boy can remember his English history with its melancholy recitation of the hanging of Catholics under Henry VIII and the burning of Protestants under Queen Mary and its sad account of generations of persecution of one dissenting faith after another. Out of these

bitter recollections grew our constitutional prohibition against the establishment by government of any official religion. But the spirit of that amendment can be defied without enacting a single law. A congress that can attack one church after another—or one churchman after another—could if so minded, reduce all but one to impotence and by that reduction, in effect, create a church so favored as to constitute an established church.

It would be unfair to charge any congressman with an intent so vile. Intent or no, however, political power, turned loose against clergymen (or churches) is a menace to our religious liberties so great and so appalling as to fill every citizen who values his faith—and its freedom from political coercion—with honest apprehension. A recent poll of opinion showing that communicants of all faiths oppose such inquiries into church affairs is heartening evidence that all faiths understand the menace and realize that a threat to one is a threat to all.

One fatal weakness marks the congressional investigations of the press, libraries, schools and churches. Most of these inquiries have not been concerned with the development of information essential to the act of legislating. Little legislation has emerged from them. These congressional committees have been performing essentially judicial functions. In many cases, they have combined executive, judicial and legislative functions. As Madison has wisely observed, the concentration of legislative, judicial and executive functions in a single body is the very definition of tyranny.

The legislature is peculiarly unfitted for the discharge of judicial duty. It is especially deficient as a court of justice and its deficiencies have been well understood in Anglo-Saxon countries for 200 years.

Macauley has well stated these weaknesses.

“However clearly political crime may have been defined by ancient laws, a man accused of it ought not to be tried by a crowd of five hundred and thirteen eager politicians, of whom he

can challenge none even with cause, who have no judge to guide them, who are allowed to come in and go out as they choose, who hear as much or as little as they choose of the accusation and of the defense, who are exposed, during the investigation, to every kind of corrupting influence, who are inflamed by all the passions which animated debate naturally excite, who cheer one orator and cough down another, who are roused from sleep to cry Aye or No, or who are hurried half drunk from their suppers to divide."

This, of course, is not a description of our Congress, but of the House of Commons of generations ago. But though our legislative body may have improved in sobriety and demeanor, many of the solid objections that Macauley makes against all legislative bodies acting in judicial capacity still are valid.

And surely, anyone who had ever read Macauley's pungent summary of the fallibility of a legislature in the capacity of a court must inevitably have recalled it upon that dreadful day when the House of Representatives thundered its applause and shouted its cheers as an eminent member made the utterly baseless charge that the most respected Bishop of one of the largest Protestant denominations in this land "served God on Sunday and the Communist front for the rest of the week."

Great as is our confidence in and preference for legislative agencies, we must take note of the pregnant question of the English historian, Smollett: "What difference is it to the subject, whether he is oppressed by an arbitrary prince, or by the despotic insolence of a ministerial majority?"

Actually, he might have pointed out that it sometimes is more baffling to contend with a hydra-headed legislative tyranny than it is to cope with a single tyrant against whom outraged public opinion can be focused.

It would be unfortunate, of course, if doubts and anxieties about some congressional investigations, and about some members of Congress,

were to lower American esteem for the legislative branch of our government, the powers of which must not be impaired, if our institutions are to be secure. No indiscriminating attack upon Congress is in order. Its legislative powers and its investigating powers are not under attack. Congress needs the fullest authority to conduct the inquiries essential to legislation and to carry on investigations of suspected malfeasance or non-feasance in the executive departments that so often have served the public good.

If the past convinces us of the usefulness of these powers, it also persuades of the dangers that lie in the abuse of such powers. Our history certainly explains why honest Americans who are wholly in sympathy with congressional determination to check, by our traditional means, Communist infiltration, find much in the course of recent congressional inquiries to give them grave disquiet. We would be deaf and blind to all instruction by the past if we did not profoundly mistrust an extension of legislative power into the areas reserved by our system of government for the executive and the judiciary. And we would be immune to all the lessons of history if we did not rightly fear the federal government's interference with our press, our libraries, our schools and colleges and our religious institutions.

