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Julien Gorbach

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“In *The Notorious Ben Hecht: Iconoclastic Writer and Militant Zionist*, Julien Gorbach highlights the character, the motivations, and the involvement of an engaged intellectual, crossing from the world of words into that of assertive advocacy on behalf of a cause deemed too narrow for the milieu in which he was a major element. In focusing on this facet of the life of one who was a borderline American Jew, Gorbach not only details the personal biography of Hecht as Hollywood screenwriter, playwright, and novelist, but in his treatment of Hecht’s activities on behalf of the Jewish resistance in Mandate Palestine against the oppressive British rule, he retrieves that period of Israel’s history shunted aside due to ideological and political bias, the years of the national liberation struggle prior to the establishment of the state that have been subjected to a campaign of purposeful neglect and which affected Hecht as well.”

—**Yisrael Medad**, Research Fellow,
Menachem Begin Heritage Center, Jerusalem

“With storytelling skills equal to his subject’s, Julien Gorbach shows the nuance and complexity of Ben Hecht’s transformation from secular and cynical Hollywood script doctor to committed Zionist activist attempting first to save the Jews of Europe during World War II, and then to found the state of Israel. Gorbach’s deeply researched and vivid depiction of Hecht’s work on behalf of Jewish survival and freedom features a compelling cast of characters, from stateside intellectuals and entertainers to American Jewish gangsters and Irgun rebels against British rule. *The Notorious Ben Hecht* rewards readers as much as Hecht’s own films, plays, and novels do.”

—**Bill Savage**, Professor of Instruction, Northwestern University



The Notorious Ben Hecht

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Cover image: Ben Hecht, half-length portrait, facing right, smoking pipe. Photo by George Maillard Kessler, 1931, courtesy of the Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-111023).

The Notorious Ben Hecht
Iconoclastic Writer and Militant Zionist

Julien Gorbach

Purdue University Press
West Lafayette, Indiana



To Buster and Alley
(1999–2013)

Who taught me so much about
innocence and love.

Rest in Peace

To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.

. . . But we do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected. We do not have to live in an idealized world to still reach for those ideals that will make it a better place.

. . . For if we lose that faith—if we dismiss it as silly or naïve; if we divorce it from the decisions that we make on issues of war and peace—then we lose what is best about humanity. We lose our sense of possibility. We lose our moral compass.

—PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA, NOBEL PRIZE FOR PEACE
ACCEPTANCE SPEECH, NOVEMBER 10, 2009

All my life I have been haunted by a phrase read in my youth in one of Joseph Conrad's books—"the soul of man." I grew up with this phrase tugging at my elbow. And I secretly measured literature, people and events by whether or not the "soul of man" was in them.

The "soul of man" meant to me the urgent rivers of emotion on which humans have always traveled—the dark torrents of mania, greed and terror; the bright streams of love and brotherhood. Beyond the monkeyshines of his politics and the inanities of his verbal worlds, this "soul of man" has beckoned my attention, stimulating and horrifying me and occasionally filling me with pride.

—BEN HECHT, *A CHILD OF THE CENTURY*, 1954

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Foreword

Any American born after 1900 and before, say, 1960 would have found it difficult to escape the influence of Ben Hecht. For at least half of what has so often been called “the American Century,” he must have seemed ubiquitous. Hecht was surely among the most prolific writers of his time; he was unstoppable. He also operated in so many genres that one life—no matter how colorful, no matter how full—barely seems to have encompassed what he achieved, in journalism, in literature, on the screen, and in polemics. Yet until now—that is, until the publication of Julien Gorbach’s lively biographical study—Hecht has eluded the grasp of scholarship. Once so pervasive and fertile a figure in the mass media, he has suffered from the neglect that he hardly merited. *The Notorious Ben Hecht* is thus a welcome corrective.

Several reasons for the academic indifference of recent decades can be proposed here. As a writer, Hecht produced his greatest and most enduring work in Hollywood, where scenarists from the birth of the sound era to the death of the studio system were subjected to contempt (“schmucks with Underwoods,” in the mogul Jack Warner’s famous dismissal). Film credits in the decades when Hecht was producing an endless stream of scripts (Gorbach stopped counting after 140 or so) are quite unreliable, and the retrospective determination of who-did-what in a collective enterprise is often a mug’s game. Even Hecht’s most famous play, the actor-proof comedy, *The Front Page* (1928), brandished a collaborator (Charles MacArthur). Because Hecht fancied himself writing for the money rather than for posterity, he left a thin paper trail after he’d cashed his checks. He was, moreover, so fluent a storyteller that later researchers may have

felt intimidated by the competition; who could match the lip-smacking mirth with which Hecht recalled (or fabricated) the highlights of his own life, especially in *A Child of the Century* (1954)?

A final conjecture for the frustrations in recounting his influence and importance is the enigma of his Jewishness. Until 1939, as Gorbach notes, Hecht came across as the hack who played to popular taste—an extremely skilled and savvy hack, to be sure, but not exactly someone to reach for gravitas. The unprecedented menace of Nazism, and then the struggle for Jewish statehood, made Hecht aware of the pertinence of the Jewish fate to “the soul of man,” and turned his life in a direction that could hardly have been foreseen in the raucous days and nights in Chicago and then Hollywood. The two previous books that delve most deeply into Hecht’s career (published in 1977 and 1990) are quite inadequate in explaining the forcefulness of his anti-Nazism and his pro-Zionism. The extent to which Gorbach addresses Hecht’s politicization in the decade of the 1940s—when it counted—may be the greatest achievement of this book, which is the first that an academic has written and by far the richest that anyone has written. He is now spared the obscurity that he risked falling into, the paradox of a prominence that once was his. The horror of the Holocaust and the rebirth of a sovereign state constitute the two most significant events of modern Jewish history, and Gorbach has entwined Hecht in both of them.

A foreword should not come with a spoiler alert, so I won’t dwell on the adroitness with which Gorbach brings to life the career of this amazing litterateur. But I must record the luck of Ben Hecht in having so tenacious a researcher and so elegant a writer in making this bon vivant and provocateur pertinent to a new generation of readers. *The Notorious Ben Hecht* manages both to penetrate a character who was sardonic and sophisticated, and to capture a life that was both flamboyant and mythic. With this book both Julien Gorbach and Purdue University Press rectify the injustice done to Hecht in the academy, and allow readers to see what that child of the century enabled millions of Americans to see.

STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

Max Richter Chair in American Civilization, Brandeis University

Acknowledgments

“Writing, at its best, is a lonely life,” Ernest Hemingway once said, but this book would not have been possible without the help of many wonderful people.

I owe a great debt to my newspaper editors, the redoubtable Bill Decker and Dan Campbell, for the guidance and encouragement they provided me when I was a reporter. They taught me the discipline of daily journalism, conscientiousness, and even some temperance, and went to bat for me on occasions when the targets of my muckraking hollered for my head. Later they wrote the endorsements that launched my career as a scholar.

After nearly a decade in the newsroom, I was welcomed back to academia as an adjunct instructor by the communication faculty of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Drs. T. Michael Maher, Lucian Dinu, and Bill Davey mentored me as a novice instructor and urged my pursuit of a doctorate. After I completed my coursework at the University of Missouri, they welcomed my return as if I had never left, now as a visiting lecturer of new media. Dr. Maher was always willing to take a chance with me, while pushing me to achieve further goals.

As a doctoral student, I had the honor of studying under brilliant professors at the University of Missouri in Columbia, the University of Chicago, and Harvard Summer School. In particular, John Frymire, Abdullahi Ibrahim, Elaine Lawless, Glenn Leshner, Earnest L. Perry, Steven Watts, and Betty Winfield in Columbia; Mark Philip Bradley and Paul Mendes-Flohr in Chicago; and Brandeis professor David Engerman in the Harvard summer program opened my eyes to new perspectives and helped me develop the knowledge and skills to become a media historian.

For all his reputed cynicism, Ben Hecht was a great believer in friendship. I am deeply grateful to lifelong friends who have made me a believer as well: Joseph Makkos, Bardia Kohn, Hannah Mackenna, Dave Scott, John Dale, Dave Twidle, Aaron Schindler, Scott Winder, David Briggs, Dane Melancon, and David and Jessica Wiley Leslie. In Columbia, Yusuf Kalyango, Jeffrey Pe-Aguirre, Seth Graves, John Swain, Terra Stephan, and Lekan Oguntoyinbo kept me focused and motivated. Hank Showers, I don't know how I would have made it through the fall of 2010 without your help. During the long slog over the last couple of years in Lafayette, Alfred J. Stahl was a constant supporter and interlocutor. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Bernard Pearce for reading passages and helping me hash out my ideas through our endless discussions, day after day, month after month, over his marvelous plates of food.

Dr. Margaret Blanchard used to say that a dissertation committee is like a stagecoach journeying on a long and dusty trail, and that it is therefore crucial to embark with the right combination of people. I was blessed to have five extraordinary fellow travelers with me for the seven years that it took to bring the dissertation from inception to completion. They were as honest in their criticism, which I needed and deserved, as they were generous in their praise. For investing so much heart and hard work, far beyond the call of duty, thanks to Drs. Dean Mills, Yong Volz, Carla Klausner, and Stephen J. Whitfield.

Steve, who from the day I called him out of the blue a decade ago has been a stalwart supporter of me and of all things Hecht, has also been gracious enough to write the foreword to this book. I am honored to receive this contribution from such a towering figure in the study of Jewish American culture and politics.

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And thanks, most of all, to my adviser and mentor Dr. Berkley Hudson, whose gentleness, wisdom, patience, and sense of humor ultimately brought out the best in me. And thanks to my parents, Judith and Sherwood Gorbach, who for fifty years have continued to amaze me with the depth of their love and devotion.



Introduction

This time, people said, Ben Hecht has gone too far.

In the spring of 1947, the American journalist turned screenwriter shocked and outraged newspaper readers across the world with a full-page advertisement that supported terrorist attacks against his country's closest military ally, Great Britain. World War II had cemented America's "special relationship" with Britain, a partnership expected to be the cornerstone of peace and stability in the postwar world. But from 1939 on, British land, sea, and air forces had shut Europe's Jews out of Palestine, effectively clamping Adolf Hitler's trap shut during the war years and, in the aftermath, leaving the survivors to languish as "displaced persons" in the liberated concentration camps. Hecht and the Irgun Zvai Leumi, the faction of Zionist fighters that he championed, believed a guerrilla war was the best way to finally smash the blockade, open the gates to mass immigration by Holocaust survivors, and thus clear a path to Jewish statehood.

Hecht's "Letter to the Terrorists of Palestine," which appeared in more than a dozen newspapers, explained that American support for the Irgun had not been forthcoming because rich and influential American Jews were opposed to the attacks. But speaking for the common person and swearing "on my word as an old reporter," Hecht declared, "Every time you blow up a British arsenal, or wreck a British jail, or send a British railroad train sky high, or let go with your guns and bombs at the British betrayers and invaders of your homeland, the Jews of America make a little holiday in their hearts."¹

The letter set off a storm of fury that roiled in the international press for months, exposing a deep schism within both Jewish and American life.² It was the culmination of Hecht's increasingly inflammatory eight-year

propaganda campaign that had generated debate and conflict at every gradation from the private to the public sphere, from bitter arguments in Jewish homes to dueling newspaper editorials to clashes in the streets outside his agitprop theatrical pageants.³

Hecht's message, reviled by a liberal elite as populist, tribalistic demagoguery, indeed as Jewish fascism, has resonated ever since. But while Hecht left an indelible mark as a provocateur during the 1940s, he was a remarkably multidimensional figure whose literary talent easily matched his genius for spectacle and controversy. By the time he published his "Letter to the Terrorists of Palestine," he was a prominent writer whose work would remain popular for generations.

From the beginning of his working life, he had established himself as a man with a magical gift for storytelling, a real-life, masculine version of Scheherazade, the tale-spinning heroine of *1001 Arabian Nights*. Having come of age as a young crime reporter in Chicago, he gained national attention with his critically acclaimed first novel, *Erik Dorn* (1921), and a collection of the short sketches he had written for his daily newspaper column, *A Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago* (1922). He is still best remembered for his first bona fide hit, *The Front Page*, a collaboration with fellow Chicago newsroom veteran Charles MacArthur. Since its sensational 1928 Broadway debut, it has spawned four movies and four television productions, a radio play, and regular revivals on the stage. Walter Kerr praised it as "a watch that laughed" for the clockwork precision of its jokes and twists. *The Front Page* remains cardinal to discussions of journalism in popular culture. With its romantic portrayal of the big-city reporter as rake and rebel, it fired the public imagination of Hecht's day just as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *All the President's Men* would for a later generation. "The play has been called the Rosetta stone of journalism, the key to figuring out the hieroglyphics and high jinks of a strange craft," noted journalism scholar Robert Schmuhl.⁴

By 1927 Hecht had already written *Underworld*, the silent film that would launch a gangster movie craze and earn him one of the first Academy Awards. Over the next forty years he spun out blockbusters with a resourcefulness, versatility, and speed that at times resembled sorcery. He justifiably claimed to have "invented the gangster movie," following up *Underworld* with *Scarface*, a 1932 epic produced by millionaire Howard Hughes to be the gangster movie to end all gangster movies. He likewise helped invent the screwball comedy, following *The Front Page* with

Twentieth Century (1934) and *Nothing Sacred* (1937). He penned the final draft of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) in one marathon session with producer David Selznick, and also wrote such classics as *Wuthering Heights* (1939) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946).⁵

Hecht was the man the studios turned to whenever they were in a jam: he could write well in any genre, at lightning speed. In 1967 *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael credited him with half the entertaining movies that Hollywood had ever produced.⁶ In addition to sixty-five screen credits and contributions to more than 140 films, he authored ten novels, about 250 short stories, a half dozen memoirs, and some twenty Broadway shows, as well as innumerable articles, columns, speeches, wartime propaganda pageants, radio dramas, and television serials.⁷

Yet Hecht's literary achievements have often obscured his historical role as the man who broke the silence about the Nazis' Final Solution to the Jewish Question. Just as Kristallnacht erupted, Hecht wrote the short story "The Little Candle," an uncanny, horrifyingly vivid prophecy of the catastrophe that was about to come. In his younger years, he had epitomized the assimilated "Un-Jewish Jew." But he "turned into a Jew in 1939," he later wrote. "The German mass murder of the Jews, recently begun, brought my Jewishness to the surface."⁸

He became a lone voice in the wilderness, calling out his Jewish movie studio bosses for cowing to the American censorship and Nazi bullying that had kept Hitler's brutal persecution off the silver screen during the 1930s. While the American press remained oblivious to the reports of a German extermination plan that surfaced early in World War II, Hecht launched a massive publicity campaign. He published jolting full-page newspaper advertisements and orchestrated star-studded theatrical spectacles at Madison Square Garden and the Hollywood Bowl that mobilized public pressure on the Roosevelt administration for an Allied rescue program.

Given the Allied leadership's resistance to his push for rescue, however, he came to view Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill as complicit in the genocide, and as six million perished, his desperation curdled into rage. After the war, he became notorious. He outraged people across the world by partnering with the Jewish gangster Mickey Cohen to arm Jews in Palestine and by calling for terrorism against Britain with his incendiary letter. The letter, with its fierce embrace of Jewish roots and acid rebuke of "respectable" assimilationists, reflected a personal transformation

that had been under way since 1939, after he had long dismissed his roots as inconsequential. Hecht may still be known today as “the Shakespeare of Hollywood,” the film industry’s most legendary screenwriter, but his activism in Jewish politics later in life is equally, if not more, significant.

The Notorious Ben Hecht is the story of how Hecht first earned admiration as a humanitarian and then vilification as an extremist at this pivotal moment in history. By looking at his entire life, the book investigates the origins of his beliefs—rooted in his varied experiences in American media—and the consequences.

The remarkable polemics of Hecht’s letter helped shape the public debate about what lessons to draw from the war. On the one side were the humanists, the mainstream Zionists, who envisioned the Jewish state as a liberal democracy and put their faith in diplomacy, multilateralism, and international law. On the other side were Hecht and the Irgun, who believed the Jews could rely on—and could be judged by—no one but themselves. The liberals saw the war as a victory of their ideology over fascism. With the birth of the United Nations, the vote for the partition of Palestine, the Nuremberg trials, the first declaration on human rights, and a convention on genocide, the 1940s were formative years for international law, and Jews could point to these achievements as assurances of their basic rights.⁹ Conversely, Hecht and the Irgun read the war as confirmation that the Jews could not survive by the rules the world made for them. While the mainstream Zionists trusted in the United States and Britain, Hecht’s faction maintained that even the world’s great democracies had failed the Jews in their hour of need. Thus, while both sides vowed “never again,” they disagreed about how to guarantee that vow. The liberal Zionists believed in the rule of international law, while Hecht and the Irgun believed in the rule of the gun.

This book attempts to shed light on that argument—which not only was foundational to the birth of the Jewish state but has determined its fate ever since—by examining an underlying question about Hecht’s worldview: his concern with what he called “the soul of man.”¹⁰ While Hecht’s contemporaries in journalism, such as Walter Lippmann and H. L. Mencken, had warned of a public too distracted, ignorant, or dimwitted to understand the complex new problems of the modern world, Hecht always had an even darker take.¹¹ He saw in humanity a dark sea of savage, primordial currents: the fears and resentments of an innate tribalism that could be churned into hate by the right demagogue. In 1939 his grim view

of human nature yielded a kind of second sight, an ability to see, with much greater clarity than most, the horror that was about to unfold in Europe. Yet when the struggle for a Jewish state was under way nearly a decade later, his letter to the terrorists and partnership with Mickey Cohen earned him infamy as a terrorist, gangster, and fascist. Where did this perspective come from, and where did it ultimately lead him?

Differing views about the soul of man have been the basis for a fundamental debate in Western civilization, a debate that connects Hecht's journalism and storytelling to his politics. These differences came to the fore in the clash between Chicago's roguish journalism, portrayed by Hecht in *The Front Page*, and the respectable journalism represented most notably by the *New York Times*, which by the 1920s had embraced fact-based objectivity as a professional standard, in a bid to protect the newspaper as what Lippmann once called "the bible of democracy."¹² This same philosophical schism, within the realm of Jewish politics, separated the Irgun and the mainstream Zionists.

Labels like *conservative* or *right-wing* would be inaccurate for Hecht, particularly given the contemporary connotations of these terms, and simply identifying him as a cynic sheds little light on his worldview. The Zionist leaders who opposed Hecht may indeed fit the liberal label, in the New Dealish center-left or Wilsonian sense. But, more to the point, the followers of Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion were proponents of liberal humanism, the classic faith of the Enlightenment. The political philosopher Isaiah Berlin has pointed out that while Enlightenment-era thinkers differed in many respects, they shared a basic optimism about human nature and the power of reason.¹³ By contrast, Romanticism, a political and cultural reaction to the Enlightenment, reflected a dark view of humanity and its twisted uses of the powers of reason, a view stunningly affirmed by the Great War and the subsequent rise of Nazism. I argue that it is instructive to understand Hecht as a *Romantic*.

While the Enlightenment-Romanticism debate is rooted in Europe, Hecht's story is emphatically an American one. Though he wrote that he "turned into a Jew in 1939," he also explained, "The discovery that I was a Jew did not send me to lighting any Friday night candles, nor did it alter by a phrase any of my attitudes towards life. These are American attitudes, born in America, nurtured in American schools and developed through service in American journalism, literature, drama, and the movies."¹⁴

From the start, his Jewish activism represented a rebellion within the media, a challenge to the Jewish movie executives—to a system that had long kept the growing menace of Nazism off the theater screens—and to the major, Jewish-owned newspapers, which had similarly kept news of the genocide off their front pages. By aggressively calling attention to his people's plight at a time when so many others were afraid to make waves, Hecht redefined what it meant to be an American Jew, and perhaps even what it meant to be an American.

His propaganda campaign began as an effort to raise a Jewish army that could fight Hitler alongside the Allies, and even during the darkest years of the Holocaust, he was savvy enough to portray the Jews as a shackled force—a “champion in chains”—rather than as victims. He evoked the legends of American Jewish prizefighters—Benny Leonard, Sid Terris, Rube Goldstein, Battling Levinsky, Barney Ross, and Maxie Baer. And he introduced an American image of the “New Jew” of the Middle East: an ancient Hebrew warrior, now resurrected to fight for his people and reclaim his homeland.¹⁵

But this former Chicago crime reporter and writer of gangster movies ultimately confronted the realities behind his own “tough Jew” myth. His new partner in militant Zionist activities, Mickey Cohen, personified that myth. Cohen, a onetime professional boxer and mob enforcer who rose to replace Bugsy Siegel as king of the West Coast rackets, was a psychopath whom the Federal Bureau of Investigation had directly linked to seven murders; he could smash a magnum of champagne across a stranger's face in a crowded elegant restaurant because of a perceived slight.¹⁶ Cohen's friendship with Hecht during the 1950s—when Hecht's cynical worldview blinded him to the gangster's dark side and manipulations—makes this a cautionary tale about Hecht's legacy.

The political rhetoric of the 1940s linked gangsterism with terrorism, with good reason: the Irgun and its small but highly effective sidekick, the Stern Gang, resorted to extortion and armed robbery to fund their military operations.¹⁷ Hecht's partnership with Cohen and other American underworld figures added another layer to the story of gangsterism and the birth of Israel, raising more questions about the distinctions—then and now—between international lawmaker and lawbreaker.

Supporters of Israel have long been loath to acknowledge that Jewish American mobsters like Cohen and Meyer Lansky made any significant contribution to the Zionist cause through their efforts to smuggle arms

and matériel to Palestine. For decades, the involvement of these racketeers and killers has been regarded as a blight on the history of the Jewish state, and, indeed, Israel's enemies have pointed to it as proof of the nation's inherently criminal character and lack of legitimacy. This book investigates the historical evidence, arguing that the importance of the role played by Jewish American gangsters has remained obscured and unrecognized.¹⁸

Hecht's importance as a multifaceted modern writer does not diminish the role he played in history. He was born shortly before the start of the twentieth century and died just as the 1960s were getting into full swing. He came of age with the advent of mass communication, and his story vividly illustrates how mass media changed the character of our culture. But he was also among the most prominent and influential disputants in a clash of political ideas that came to the fore with the rise of Nazism, the Holocaust, and the birth of Israel. Hecht aptly titled his major autobiography *A Child of the Century*, and his life provides a remarkable window into the times that shaped our world.



PRELUDE

The Lost Land of Boyhood

My Jewishness does not belong to any other land. Despite the activities of the back-to-Palestine patriots, the Jew of America has no secondary homeland. . . . As a Jew he is loyal to the same ideas to which he gives his American loyalty. He cries for the rights of man, and for the decent, unperilous operation of government. If he cries more loudly for these than the American next to him, is he not, perhaps, more American?

—BEN HECHT, *A GUIDE FOR THE BEDEVILLED*¹

Just before America's entry into World War II, Ben Hecht was sitting in a New York City tavern when a chance encounter with an old friend transported him into the past. He and Sherwood Anderson had first met thirty years earlier, just as Anderson was becoming one of the defining voices of the preindustrial American heartland.

Anderson had once written tenderly and deeply of "small towns and small people," Hecht explained in a newspaper column a few days later. His friend had "reinvented the American soul," finding it "in the milking shed, the hardware store, the village meeting hall, in the factory noon-hour, and on the front porch." When Anderson now mentioned that he was about to leave the country, perhaps never to return, Hecht asked why. This "Dostoevsky of the corn belts" invited him to guess.²

"I ought to know, and do," Hecht wrote. "Sherwood is off to find something that vanished out of the world he knew and wrote about. It

disappeared out of the West and East and even the South, where he went looking for it a few years ago. It was the America he knew—that moody, whimsical, and inarticulate hero of the pre-radio, pre-movie hinterlands.”³

Hecht thought he understood his friend’s plan for self-imposed exile because he too had belonged to that lost America, a world that had been erased by the media, modernization, and war. It was the land of Hecht’s boyhood. Although he had been born in New York City on February 28, 1893, his family had settled in Racine, Wisconsin, by about 1903.⁴ By all accounts, his adolescence was a Tom Sawyer–like existence, typical of small Midwestern towns before the Great War: idyllic but never-dull days occupied by imaginative schemes drawn from the adventure stories he devoured.

For most of Hecht’s life, he had little reason to dwell on the one aspect of his experience that differed from Anderson’s, or Mark Twain’s: he was the child of Jewish immigrants. “There was no Jewish situation in my world of redskins, buccaneers and acrobats,” he later wrote. “Jewish history consisted only of my folks who had, after many hardships, arrived in the U.S.A., and who considered themselves happily to be Americans with a slight accent.”⁵ Indeed, all that he admired in Jews he also admired in his fellow Americans, and he found so much to celebrate in being American that he saw no reason that his Jewishness even mattered.

Ben’s parents, Joseph Hecht and Sarah Swernofsky, had immigrated from Russia in the mid-1880s and settled in the Jewish ghetto on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the primary destination for East European Jews and one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the world. The couple married in 1892, a year before their son’s birth. Reared in this transplanted shtetl, or Jewish village, teeming with pickle vendors, delicatessens, synagogues, union halls, and Yiddish theaters, Ben learned to speak Yiddish almost as fluently as English.⁶

Joseph worked as a cloth cutter in the district’s sweating system, a hive of textile production lines crammed into the tenements, where workers often toiled for fourteen hours a day, six days a week. Ben was still a toddler when his father decided to strike out on his own as a clothing designer. The family tried several locations—Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, where Joseph had a position as a designer and factory manager—before finally moving to Racine. There Joseph started manufacturing lines of women’s clothing, while Sarah operated a store, the Paris Fashion, in the downtown business district.⁷

Once ensconced in pastoral Racine, Ben set roaring autumn-leaf bonfires, shot flaming arrows dipped in kerosene in mock Indian battles, manufactured bottled hydrogen for reasons unknown, hunted frogs, flooded his boardinghouse's backyard to create a skating rink, dug caves in lake banks and built huts in the breakwaters and snow forts in the blizzards, serenaded girls beneath their windows, and nurtured a crush on his Latin teacher. He ran on the track team and played right end for the football team until he was injured, when he became a cheerleader. He went on hayrides, sleigh rides, bicycle rides, train rides, and boat rides.⁸

"I lay dreaming during heavy summer hours on hilltops, staring at cloud galleons, and the sky was part of my flesh," he wrote in his autobiography, *A Child of the Century*.

The wind blew out of my bones. At night the star clusters were my eyeballs. I was related to everything—to a dead fish, a crushed worm, a wall of green water breaking over my boat. I went leaping after grasshoppers and butterflies, breasts and pelvises, print, and Time itself. I knew no other way to live than to worship each new burst of sun over the horizon. My prayers were yells, my hymns were squeals and curses. I yearned, swelled, wept, ravished, splashed through mud and rolled in flowers—and was never injured, and hurt no one.⁹

There were already hints of the future he would have in the arts and show business. With a box camera as big as a suitcase, he took photos that he tried, unsuccessfully, to sell. He performed shadowgraphs and magic shows, with his younger brother, Peter, as an assistant, who dressed up in a rummaged George Washington outfit. He attended vaudeville shows at the Bijou Theater and dramas at the Opera House.¹⁰

Despite Hecht's reputation as a firebrand in middle age, teenage peers remembered him as quiet and shy, but they nevertheless remembered him. "Ben was always where the action was and wherever Ben was, there was action," said classmate Grace Miller. "No one seemed to know Ben really well, but everybody certainly liked him. He was really different." He raised money for the school yearbook, *The Comet*, and for a student newspaper by selling advertising copy in verse.¹¹

Ben's thirteenth birthday brought a momentous event: the arrival of four crates of books, including a fifteen-volume collection of Shakespeare, thirty-volume sets of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, and a fifty-two

volume *History of the World*. Joseph, who had little education, had read none of these but had asked a scholar, a brother Elk, to select them. More than forty years later, when he was writing his memoir, Ben still kept the books in his bedroom.¹²

Joseph had also bestowed something else on his son: a natural talent for narrative. “Our father spent many of his evenings talking about his childhood in Russia and composed tales about the country, people, oppression, etc.,” recalled Peter. “Dad was a gifted storyteller. He blended the real with unreal—factual with fantasy. This in my opinion was the one real mental quality [Ben] inherited from our father.”¹³

But Joseph was a *luftmensch*, to use the Yiddish term for a man lost in reverie. He tried to open another clothing store in Kalamazoo, Michigan, but, according to Peter, was fleeced by his business partner, who absconded with the factory bankroll and as much stock as he could liquidate. “[Dad] was not of the tribe of realists,” Hecht related in *A Child of the Century*. “He savored success before it came. He rolled in millions when only pennies were in the safe. The chief and busiest department of his factory was always an air castle. He never had any profits to share with his family, except the happy smile of his daydreams. Tall, lean, straight-backed, child-like, misinformed, his eyes gentle and confused, his wide mouth firm, he retold in miniature the lies of Don Quixote.”¹⁴

As a teenager, Hecht had another opportunity to see dreams collide with reality, in a brief career as a circus trapeze artist. It immersed him in a world equal parts enchanting, melancholy, and surreal, which would thereafter fire his literary imagination. The proprietress of the Hecht family’s boardinghouse had once been a bareback-riding beauty married to “Dapper Dan” Castello, a partner of P. T. Barnum and one of the great acrobatic clowns of the American circus. Castello had performed before Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales, earning the praise of Charles Dickens. Only weeks after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, his circus and menagerie became the first to complete a coast-to-coast tour, mostly by train. The following year, Castello and business partner W. C. Coup coaxed Barnum out of retirement for what would soon become “the Greatest Show on Earth.”¹⁵

Just after their peak of fortune in 1871, Castello and his wife, Frances, fell on hard times, however. The couple separated, and Castello, who had parted with Barnum by 1875, died a near pauper in 1909. Frances had by then sold the house at 827 Lake Avenue to build the boardinghouse across

the street, where the Hechts were given the largest of what Ben described as “a rabbit warren of rooms.” The rest were occupied by roughly a dozen transients. “They were circus folk,” Hecht recalled, “retired from the sawdust world, but springing constantly out of retirement for lesser roles in smaller and smaller tents.”¹⁶

Hecht described the Castellós’ son, Harry, as his first mentor. For about three years, until Hecht was fourteen, the alcoholic former acrobat trained him on the trapeze in the octagonal barn behind the boardinghouse. Whereas once Castello’s Egyptian Caravan and Circus had toured the entire Great Lakes and Mississippi River in a 152-foot steamer, Harry and his young apprentice built an eighteen-foot sloop, *The Seabird*, with which Hecht and a handful of friends plied the shoreline of Lake Michigan. And whereas Castello had crossed the mountains and plains with camels and elephants and had ring-mastered Barnum’s extravaganza, in 1907 Harry led Hecht and the boardinghouse troupe on a one-ring mud show tour of rural Wisconsin.

The circus was overtaken by bankruptcy after a couple of months. “On the way to Fond du Lac it mysteriously disintegrated,” Hecht recalled, “its tent, its blue-painted rows of flap-down seats, its thousands of feet of heavy ropes and various pieces of unsatisfactory equipment, all disappearing along with all my genial and arthritic colleagues of the sawdust.”¹⁷

If the men in Hecht’s life had shown him daydreams and their inevitable disappointments, it was two women, his no-nonsense mother and his Tante (Aunt) Chasha, who molded him into a hard-nosed realist and iconoclast. Before her marriage, Sarah had been a showroom model, but for Hecht, “it was her goodness and honor that were her most striking features. They stared out of her a bit fiercely, and gave her a haughty air. With her firm shape and her bold blue eyes she looked, in my youth and hers, a bit more Valkyrie than Venus.”¹⁸

While Joseph blithely accepted his business misfortunes, Sarah apparently made sure the family stayed afloat. She used her savings to buy the Paris Fashion storefront in the choicest location in town because “she didn’t care for a position as a housewife,” according to Peter. Ben recalled that she was proud and confident despite—or perhaps because of—her hardscrabble beginnings on a farm in southern Russia. But she could also be playful and childlike. She never preached to or harangued her sons, though her interactions with the rest of the world were a different matter. “Among my mother’s more disturbing virtues was a passion for truth-telling,” Hecht

observed. “She was terribly vain of the fact that she couldn’t tell a lie. In fact, she was vain of all her virtues and disdainfully conscious of their absence in others.”¹⁹

The cherub-faced Tante Chasha—a “tall, swarthy, fat, and profane” aunt who wore a diamond brooch—was another major influence. She delivered one of her most important lessons when Ben was six years old, during a visit to a Yiddish theater. Caught up in the drama of the play and too young to understand theater etiquette, he had shouted in protest against a gross miscarriage of justice portrayed onstage. Aunt and nephew were brusquely escorted out to the lobby, where a theater manager demanded an apology. Tante Chasha let forth a stream of Yiddish curses as she cracked the manager over the head with her umbrella, sending him backward with a stagger and groan. “Remember what I tell you,” she told Hecht, smiling as she whisked him outside. “That’s the right way to apologize.”²⁰

As for the rest of his aunts and uncles, in *A Child of the Century* he paints them in tableau, sketching a portrait of each as he recounts a Fourth of July celebration on the porch in Racine.²¹ Uncle Max had a drooping Cossack moustache, Chinese eyes, and a missing finger, deliberately shot off to avoid service in the czar’s army. Years after his death, Max’s wife, Eta, lavished attention on Hecht, now fully grown, in a tiny Lower East Side restaurant that she owned, her late husband’s favorite singer, Caruso, crooning on the phonograph. The struggling widow passed away a few years later, “after many misadventures, including the amputation of a leg.”²²

Uncle Joe had a talent for toil, and his workers cursed him as a slave driver though he labored in their midst, no fewer than twelve hours a day, often all night, and always in his finest attire. His wife, Tante Lubi, hosted all-night poker games for the great Yiddish actors, who would eat from a massive bowl of sauerkraut, goose fat, and onions all diced together.

Tante Millie’s husband, Issy, a French Jew, rose from a Bowery pickle peddler to a millionaire clothier, before finally dying destitute.

Most memorable was Uncle Jake, the family hero, Hecht’s first model of a tough Jew. Hecht remembered him as a living Samson or Judah Maccabee. Jake was said to be even stronger than the late great Uncle Breitbart, whose favorite stunt—lying on spikes while trucks rode over him—had eventually been his end. In the Russian city of Kremenchug, where the Hechts and Swernofskys hailed from, Uncle Jake had cared little for tending geese, tailoring, and learning about religion. Instead, he

stalked the nighttime streets, looking for Jew-hating Cossacks to battle. In America there were no Cossacks, so Jake found a new enemy: capitalism. While the rest of the family plunged into business, he became a socialist and defended downtrodden Jews against strikebreakers. One day a troop of policemen moved to break up a union rally, and Jake stepped into its path. According to the family, it required twenty officers to take him down. He was carried to the hospital with broken bones and was laid up for two months. Jake then retired from fighting and went to work for Uncle Joe.

Having introduced each member of the family, Hecht returned to the scene on the porch that July Fourth. The sun set as the group shared the peppered beef, salami, smoked whitefish, and other delicacies brought along from the ghetto's delis. Once it became dark, they began to sing. "I heard Yiddish songs as I watched the fireworks that celebrated the birth of freedom," Hecht recalled.²³

The lives of Hecht's aunts and uncles, like those of his native-born neighbors, were hardly trouble-free. They had experienced extreme hardship and tragedy. But dreamers and realists alike were honest and hard-working, and they met their challenges with optimism, and without bitterness or self-pity. Introducing that scene on the porch in *A Child of the Century*, written just a few years after the birth of Israel, Hecht said, "I have believed in a nation of Jews and worked for that belief. But there are moments when I think wistfully of the lost innocence of the Jews, when the only politics they knew was the management of heaven."²⁴

Here, preserved in microcosm in Hecht's memory, was the shtetl. Like the youthful America of Sherwood Anderson and Mark Twain, it was a lost world. But the destruction of the shtetl had been deliberate: East European pogroms had killed tens of thousands by 1920, followed by Nazi Germany's "Final Solution to the Jewish Question." In 1946 Hecht reviewed a story collection featuring Tevya the Milkman, the protagonist later popularized for Americans by *Fiddler on the Roof*. Writing for the *New York Times*, Hecht observed:

"The Old Country," a collection of Sholom Aleichem's tales, is more than a book. It is the epitaph of a vanished world and an almost vanished people. The salty and hilarious folk of whom it tells—the Jews of Europe—are dead. All the Tevyas whose souls and sayings, whose bizarre and tender antics Sholom Aleichem immortalized in the richest

Yiddish prose ever written—were massacred, six million strong, by the Germans. And all the quaint and heartwarming villages in which the Jews of Europe lived are no longer on the map.²⁵

Hecht would report that he reached the age of forty without once encountering anti-Semitism or even concerning himself with its existence. Fellow *Daily News* alumnus Meyer Levin found that hard to believe, coming from a Chicago newspaperman with such a Jewish name, and argued that it revealed “Hecht’s capacity for attitudinizing and self-deception.” By Hecht’s lights, however, his sense of belonging in American society had made it easy to live as what he called an “Un-Jewish Jew.” The rise of Nazism finally changed that: by 1943 he was witnessing anti-Semitism all over the United States, even among some he had considered friends. It was as if Hitler had spread the disease of Jew hatred around the world.²⁶

Hecht said that although he never lived “as a Jew” or even among Jews, “my family remained like a homeland in my heart.” Yet one day there would be even more personal reasons driving his turn to activism and embrace of Jewishness. From the circus troupes of his childhood to the reporters, impresarios, militants, and mobsters he knew in succeeding years, Hecht would spend a lifetime attaching himself to various groups, only to drift away. For a man who held the journalistic ethos of objectivity in such disdain, he maintained a curious kind of detachment. The consummate insider, he was also an outsider, like Georg Simmel’s *stranger from within*: “he who is far, is actually near.”²⁷

Having graduated from high school in the spring of 1910, Hecht enrolled that summer at the University of Wisconsin, where he immediately found himself in the uneasy company of fraternity brothers with starched collars. An impulsive comment—that he was not sure what he would learn in the College of Arts and Sciences, since he had already read all the books on the course list—was not well received. His indignant peers demanded an apology. But Hecht, remembering his Tante Chasha’s advice about apologies, instead caught a train for Chicago, where he soon joined a new troupe: Chicago newspapermen.

PART I

THE NEWSPAPERMAN

The Chicago School of Journalism

In July 1910, when Ben Hecht was seventeen years old, he ran away by train from the University of Wisconsin in Madison and slept through the night on a bench in the Chicago railroad station. Less than eager to report to his parents, he spent the morning wandering the downtown business loop and was in line for a vaudeville matinee when a distant uncle, long out of touch with his parents, spotted him. Hecht told Uncle Moyses that he was looking for a job. Moyses brought him to *Chicago Daily Journal* publisher John C. Eastman and introduced him as a writer.¹

Eastman, who was throwing a stag party that evening, promised Hecht a position if he could write a story in verse about a bull who swallowed a bumblebee, defecated it, and got stung in the arse. “I want a moral on the end,” Eastman added. Hecht complied. Having passed this test, he was escorted to city editor Ballard Dunne, who told him to report at six the next morning. Incredulous, Hecht pointed out that the next day was the Fourth of July. “There are no holidays in this dreadful profession you have chosen,” Mr. Dunne replied.²

Over the years that followed, Hecht found fellowship among the tribe of city newsmen. He first emulated and then grew to personify the mix of cynicism, sentimentality, and mischief that he presented in his iconic farce about Chicago reporters, *The Front Page*. In 1919 Hecht spent a grim year as a foreign correspondent, returning to Chicago during the early

days of Prohibition and Al Capone. But by then his once-jolly cynicism had soured, and he had grown ambivalent about his old milieu. Over the next decade, he distilled his views of the press and gangsters in works that made him rich and famous: *Underworld* (1927), *The Front Page* (1928), and *Scarface* (1932).

Hildy Johnson, the Faustian protagonist of *The Front Page*, is caught in the spell of his Mephistophelean editor, Walter Burns. Walter sells him on a fantasy of everlasting boyhood devilry as a newshound, and, thus entranced, Hildy starts to sleepwalk away from his sensible plan to quit journalism, get married, and pursue an advertising career in New York. The devil's bargain that Walter dangles before Hildy evokes Hecht's own proclivities. "Born perversely," Hecht once wrote of himself: a classic Faustian Romantic, he was drawn to the dark, the forbidden, the dangerous, or the just plain wrong, and he found kinship with rebels and renegades.³ The impulse drove both Hecht's Romanticist approach to storytelling and a fascination with criminals and gangsters that he shared with his fellow newspapermen and women. From the start, he had admired Chicago reporters as a tribe of outlaws, a view encouraged when, in the 1920s, the newspaper industry adopted professional standards that marginalized his city's brand of journalism.⁴

But the link between Chicago's press and outlaws was more than metaphor. In one telling scene in *The Front Page*, reporters greet a gangster named Diamond Louie. Waving off their inquiries about plans to knock off a rival, Louie explains that he is now retired. "Yeah. That's right. I'm a newspaperman . . . working for Walter Burns," he says. "I'm assistant circulation manager for de nort' side."⁵

Perhaps because the epic contest in New York between media titans William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer looms so large in American memory, it has overshadowed the dark chapter in journalism that followed, when Hearst shifted his sights to Chicago. Determined to gain an edge on the local competition after the launch of the *Chicago American* in 1900, Hearst hired Max Annenberg, an immigrant from East Prussia and a Chicago West Sider, to organize crews of "slugger" to strong-arm newsboys into ditching stacks of rival newspapers. The *Tribune* and *Daily News* soon rose to the challenge, and what started with knives and brickbat brawls between gangs of neighborhood toughs evolved into shooting sprees that claimed the lives of newsboys and residents alike.

It became a three-way war, as the top dailies fought each other, and all sides attacked organized labor. Between 1910 and 1913, twenty-seven newsdealers were killed, according to one oft-cited estimate.⁶ After that, the killings, beatings, and abductions continued until bootlegging offered the gangs more handsome rewards. By the 1930s, various memoirs and press histories divulged that Chicago's Prohibition-era gangsters had received their training as gunmen in the circulation wars before graduating to organized crime with the passage of the Volstead Act.⁷ And it was the alumni of Chicago's newsrooms, Hecht among them, who helped gangsters achieve national celebrity through best-selling books, Broadway hits, and, ultimately, the gangster movie craze.

Despite the carnage of the press's "reign of terror," as one early chronicler called it, the police and the newspapers looked the other way.⁸ But this was hardly the only major story they failed to cover. Here was a city crying out for reform. "Chicago is the place to make you appreciate at every turn the absolute opportunity that chaos affords," John Dewey wrote his wife. "Every conceivable thing solicits you; the town seems filled with problems holding out their hands and asking somebody to please solve them—or else dump them in the Lake."⁹

During the same period when Max Annenberg and his brother Moses first signed on with the *American's* circulation department, the city's *ten* dailies all ignored the fire code violations in the graft-ridden First Ward, which routinely had lethal consequences.¹⁰ Finally, on December 30, 1903, a blaze at the Iroquois Theatre claimed some six hundred lives, mostly children. Over the next three years, it would take a series of exposés in the *Lancet*, a British journal, to break arguably the biggest story in the city's history: the disgusting and dangerous conditions in the stockyards, which became the focus of Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle*.¹¹

Chicago's newspapermen reflected the character of the city itself. For a reporter who spent days and nights dashing between crime scenes, trolley car and machinery accidents, and the city morgue, Chicago in the throes of its industrial boom was a raw and brutal place. Doug Fetherling puts it well in his biography of Hecht: "Chicago seemed a prairie Gomorrah where homicide was the logical solution to arguments and chicanery a natural force in the administration of justice. Streets were torn down and new ones erected, gang bosses were murdered to be supplanted by their killers, a dozen railways brought an influx of immigrants never matched

by the number of people heading out. . . . [Hecht's] rhythms were those of the train wheels, factory whistles, gunfire and later the jazz music of a city which was, just then, exactly what [Carl] Sandburg said it was: hogbutcher, freight-handler, builder of railroads."¹²

Or as Hecht would recall: "Trains were wrecked, hotels burned down, factories blew up. A man killed his wife in their Sedgwick Avenue flat, cut off her head and made a tobacco jar of its skull. . . . The headlines of murder, rape and swindle were ribbons around a Maypole. The Elevated squealed Hosannahs in the sooty air. The city turned like a wheel."¹³

CHAPTER 1

The Chicago School

Journalists! Peeking through keyholes! Running after fire engines like a lot of coach dogs! Waking people up in the middle of the night to ask them what they think of Mussolini. Stealing pictures off old ladies of their daughters that get raped in Oak Park. A lot of lousy, daffy buttinskis swilling around with holes in their pants, borrowing nickels from office boys! And for what? So a million hired girls and motormen's wives will know what's going on. . . . I don't need anybody to tell me about newspapers. I've been a newspaperman for fifteen years. A cross between a bootlegger and a whore. And if you want to know something, you'll all end up on the copy desk—gray-headed, humpbacked slobs, dodging garnishees when you're ninety.

—HILDY JOHNSON IN *THE FRONT PAGE*¹

The things we'll do for our papers! We lie, we cheat, we swindle and steal. We break into houses. We almost commit murder for a story. We're a bunch of lice.

—*HERALD AND EXAMINER* REPORTER SAM BLAIR²

There is a rich body of lore about the *Front Page* era of Chicago newspapers, tales reworked over and over in the memoirs of the veterans. Originally swapped in downtown barrooms and greasy spoons, these jumbled yarns, spun by conspicuously unreliable narrators, offer tribute to mischief in the name of journalism.³ As sources of history, they are a tangle, but though the facts may vary, the essential story remains consistent.

In his own memoir, Hecht recalled that his first job in journalism was to beg, borrow, or (mostly) steal newsworthy photos as a “picture chaser” for the *Journal*. After Tante Chasha sewed large pockets into his jacket to conceal burglary tools and the loot, he “clambered up fire escapes, crawled through windows and transoms, posing when detected as everything from a gas meter inspector to an undertaker’s assistant,” recalled friend and fellow journalist Charles Samuels. Soon Hecht graduated to working as a reporter and professional hoaxer. Collaborating with photographer Gene Cour, he delivered splashy scoops on police pursuits of riverboat pirates and the Great Chicago Earthquake, which tore a terrific fissure through Lincoln Park.⁴

But our sole source for many of these extraordinary tales is Hecht himself. Samuels was a reporter and did work as a legman for Hecht, but Samuels lived in New York and in 1910 would have been only eight years old.⁵ Yet while *A Child of the Century* has been criticized as one of “the less serious books [that] . . . shamelessly fictionalize events,” there is a basis of truth to Hecht’s newspaper stories.⁶ Though they seem fantastic, they explain the traditions of Chicago journalism through a kind of narrative shorthand. It may seem incredible that newspapers paid young men to break into homes and steal photographs, but Theodore Dreiser cites it as common practice in his memoir, *Newspaper Days*. Vincent Starrett, who, like Hecht, started as a picture chaser, describes his own adventures in detail.⁷

Hecht’s claim that his promotion to reporter afforded the opportunity for a short-lived career as a hoaxer recalls yet another dubious journalistic sport, one that Chicago reporters adopted and made peculiarly their own. The hoax was a tradition of the nineteenth century: a rash of them had appeared with the advent of New York’s penny press in the 1830s, and by the 1850s, variations on the tall tale were a staple of Western newspapers. Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe perfected hoaxing as an art, while in more modern times, Orson Welles would leave an indelible mark on mass media history with his *War of the Worlds* broadcast.

But the Chicago hoax went beyond a mere genial prank: it became one more ploy to use in the bare-knuckle fight for scoops. In the 1890s, Finley Peter Dunne of the *Herald* and Charles Dillingham of the *Times* brought it into play against the *Tribune*’s Frank Vanderlip, their competitor on the hotel beat. Vanderlip could not understand how his rivals kept grabbing exclusives with famous and exotic personages who had stopped in

town overnight and then vanished without a trace. Vanderlip was fired for incompetence, without ever realizing that these extraordinary hotel guests had never come to town or did not exist. Chicago reporters had put their own spin on the hoax. It was no longer a shared joke but a hustle pulled on the competition and the public alike.⁸

Chicago newspapermen were delinquents and misfits, “part detectives, thieves and con-men who enjoyed prying into the lives and business of others, and a few had the touch of a poet,” observed one historian. Hecht’s compatriots included an undertaker’s assistant, a tramp, an aspiring opera singer, a failed priest, an ex-fighter, a former strong man in the circus, and a crackpot mystic embittered by gonorrhea. “I became a journalist after I had failed at nearly everything else,” wrote Starrett.⁹

Oddball quirks, rivalries, and devious tactics all became part of the persona of the modern urban reporter. This identity, which had coalesced by the time Hecht joined the *Journal* in 1910, had its origins in two local institutions of the late nineteenth century, when reporters were developing self-awareness about their profession and were eager to mythologize it.¹⁰ One was Chicago’s wire service, the City News Bureau, which functioned as a kind of early journalism school. The other was a fraternity of literary-minded police reporters called the Whitechapel Club, which took its name from the London slum where Jack the Ripper had committed his murders. Hecht evoked both institutions, and their legacies, in his memoirs. All along, he cultivated an image as a Whitechapel and carried on the spirit of the club.¹¹

Home to boisterous rebels and a morbid, bizarre brand of bohemianism, the Whitechapel Club originally convened in the back room of Henry Koster’s saloon; the club was established in the summer of 1889 by journalists who found the Press Club of Chicago too stodgy and expensive. It was an alternative to the seamy downtown taverns, a place of refuge at the end of a shift, sometimes late at night, where reporters could discuss their jobs, social issues, and their shared literary ambitions. It served as a forum, wrote Alfred Lawrence Lorenz, “in which they could define themselves as journalists by agreeing on what journalists were, how they should approach their work, and on a set of professional values—in short, what it meant to be a journalist.” Although the Whitechapel Club existed for only five years, it became a legend, influencing generations of journalists to follow.¹²

Most memorable was the club's decor. A thick oak door with ornate wrought-iron scrollwork opened to a room dominated by a horse-shoe-shaped bar. Each place was set with a churchwarden's pipe and a tobacco-filled bowl that had once been the brainpan of a skull. The sawed-off lower portions of these skulls served as shades for the club's gas lighting fixtures. Brightly colored glass globes implanted in the eyeholes cast weird, eerie hues. Dr. John C. Spray, a Whitechapel member and superintendent of a hospital for the insane, had donated the skulls, which he had used in a study that purportedly discovered cranial differences between the sound of mind and the mentally ill. The adornments on the walls included a twelve-foot-long snakeskin, skeletons, blades, revolvers, and bullets that had slain famous criminals. The pride of the club, though, was the smaller room upstairs, fitted with a coffin-shaped bar studded with large brass railheads imprinted with the number of each member. Lorenz noted, "The decorations served as symbols of the often-dark world the members covered and the mocking posture they assumed toward it."¹³

Police reporters of the 1890s were exposed to the harshest and most gruesome realities of city life, while under the pressure of intense journalistic competition. The humorist Opie Read recalled that his fellow members sought to produce "photographic exposures of contemporary existence," whereas he wanted his journalism to be more like painting. Whitechapel became a wellspring of the naturalist school that emerged from journalism as a seminal movement in American literature. A hard-bitten, unique literary society, the club contributed to an enduring myth of "men who insisted on talking to one another about the hypocrisy of the social system even while they were being paid to explain it away, . . . who read everything they could get their hands on and fanned one another's literary aspirations as they sat about in the city room on a rainy night," noted journalism historian Larzer Ziff.¹⁴

The City News Bureau helped to forge another integral element of the Chicago style: the scoop, which, as Martin Mayer explained in *Making News*, "has been cultivated more jealously and single-mindedly in Chicago than anywhere else." A venerable local institution for more than a century, the bureau established itself in the 1890s as a training ground for cub reporters, known for "its iron discipline, its hard-nosed insistence on accuracy and, most of all, its legendary tightfistedness," according to A. A. Dornfeld.¹⁵ In the days before journalism schools, the bureau instilled a code in its graduates and thus in the whole Chicago press—a code shaped

by the dictates of free-market competition rather than a sense of civic mission. Speed and accuracy meant survival in a crowded newspaper field. Yet, ironically, the same bottom line that compelled a swarm of young men to get their facts straight also honed their talents for deception and misdirection in the contest for scoops, creating the cutthroat culture portrayed in *The Front Page*.

The City News developed a rather schizophrenic attitude toward the truth. A news service could ill afford mistakes or fabrications, which could damage the reputations of client newspapers or, worse, lead to libel suits. Accuracy thus became the watchword that bureau editors branded on the minds of their young charges. At the same time, *how* reporters got their news was another matter entirely; the papers counted on the City News to be on top of every breaking story. The bureau stretched its budget to the limit to underwrite twenty-four-hour vigils, streetcar fare, legmen, and, most famously, a pneumatic tube system put into use in 1893, which shot dispatches to newsrooms at thirty to seventy miles an hour through an underground labyrinth of pipes. Every reporter knew that the proven ability to produce scoops would be his ticket to his first newspaper job, an end to the grueling hours and pauper's wages of the City News.¹⁶

“Get the news! Get the news!”—that was the great cry in the city editorial room,” recalled Dreiser, who was struck by the “pagan or unmoral character” of newspaper work.

Don't worry much over how you get it, but get it, and don't come back without it! Don't fall down! Don't let other newspapers skin us—that is, if you value your job! . . . While a city editor might readily forgive any form of trickery he would never forgive failure. Cheat and win and you were all right; be honest and lose and you were fired. To appear wise when you were ignorant, dull when you were not, disinterested when you were interested, brutal or severe when you might be just the reverse—these were the essential tricks of the trade. . . . And I . . . soon encountered other newspaper men who were as shrewd and wily as ferrets, who had apparently but one motive in life: to trim their fellow newspaper men in the matter of news, or the public which provided the news.¹⁷

Tales of scooping in the *Front Page* era are legion. Reporters were known to toss false tips that sent the competition on wild goose chases. *Collier's* celebrated Harry Romanoff of the *Herald and Examiner* as

Chicago's greatest telephone reporter because of his talent at impersonations. Once, calling a barroom where a murder had occurred, Romanoff identified himself as Sgt. Donohue of the coroner's office. "That's funny," said the voice on the other end. "So is this." And City News alum and *Herald and Examiner* editor Frank Carson staged a collision of two circulation trucks in front of a police station, a diversion that enabled his operatives to steal the diary of the alluring murderess Ruth Randall out of the evidence room.¹⁸

Courtroom scoops involved ingenuity and acrobatics. According to one account, City News staffer George Wright enlisted a courthouse janitor to bring a twenty-foot plank into the ceiling crawlspace above grand jury proceedings for the infamous Leopold-Loeb murder case. Wright then drilled a hole and used a stethoscope to listen in, confounding investigators for days. When the jury convened in the famous 1897 case of human remains found in a vat at a sausage factory, Fred A. Smith lowered himself into a courthouse air duct by rope. Hecht's friend Wallace Smith, of the *American*, hung upside down from the eaves of the courthouse roof, fifty feet above the ground, to peer through the windows of the jury room.¹⁹

Sometimes reporters planted evidence. "If it occurred to us that a janitor's missing mother-in-law might have been lured into the janitor's furnace, and the clues did not fit that attractive hypothesis," wrote Starrett, "we helped the story to headlines by discovering incinerated bones that somehow the police had missed."²⁰

Journalism historians have generally contended that by the 1890s all the elements of objectivity had come together. Over the next century, it would become the ideal, or what one media critic in 1996 denounced as "the false god" of the profession. A key element is supposed to be detachment: a textbook from 1911 instructs reporters to "keep yourself out of the story," while one from 2012 explains that journalists "are neutral observers, not advocates or participants."²¹ Such admonishments must have struck newshounds of the *Front Page* era as a joke, if not a complete surprise.

When Chicago crime reporters were not breaking into places or pulling a con, they were busy acting as the local law enforcement. "Murder mysteries fascinated readers, and the reporters, not the police, would solve them," wrote John J. McPhaul in *Deadlines and Monkeyshines: The Fabled World of Chicago Journalism*. George Murray, a veteran of William Randolph Hearst's newspaper, argued that the phenomenon of the reporter as supersleuth should not be surprising, since newspapers had far more

money and resources for certain investigations than police departments did. Among the most famous newspaper detectives was Buddy McHugh, portrayed in *The Front Page* as “Buddy McCue.” When the police hit a dead end interrogating a slow-witted suspect about the fatal beating of a widow, McHugh broke the impasse, asking simply, “Did she scream when you hit her, Eddie?” To elicit the confession of child killer Thomas Richard Fitzgerald, Romanoff presented Fitzgerald with a newly purchased doll that he claimed had belonged to the victim.²²

In the 1890s the sheriff’s department swore in reporters as deputies and allowed them to make their own news by raiding the gambling dens of Michael Cassius McDonald, a Democratic Party boss and the publisher of the *Chicago Globe*. Papers supplied badges that reporters could flash to pass themselves off as detectives or assistant coroners. By the mid-1920s, the police provided press cards inscribed with a note from the chief of police, instructing that journalists be extended all courtesies. But editor Frank Carson, always ready to push things further, invented “muscle journalism,” manufacturing phony badges, warrants, and other documents and installing wiretaps. On one occasion, he recruited a bruiser from the Circulation Department to pose as a detective to “arrest” a killer in Adams, Wisconsin.²³

If the City News was the trade school where journalists learned such arts of manipulation, it was Walter Howey, Carson’s mentor and boss, who reigned as master. The managing editor of the *Herald and Examiner*, Howey would become immortalized as the Machiavellian genius Walter Burns of *The Front Page*. *Time* would describe him as “a profane romanticist, ruthless but not cruel, unscrupulous but endowed with a private code of ethics. He was the sort of newsman who managed to have Hell break loose under his feet, expected similar miracles from his underlings, and rewarded them generously.” When a staffer named Eddie Doherty produced one “sob story” too many, Howey advised, “This isn’t that kind of story, Eddie, it’s straight news. And don’t try to break my heart. It isn’t that kind of heart.”²⁴

Howey’s mild-mannered appearance belied his ferocity as a competitor and power broker.²⁵ Many of the tales about Howey concerned his journalistic feats, but Howey soon found that his investigative talents were far more useful to newspapers for extortion rather than for journalism. By the time Howey assumed the helm of the *Herald and Examiner*, he had amassed an extensive collection of files on local officials.

Sticking by mayoral candidate William Hale Thompson, when no other paper was willing to support him, proved another winning card. Charlie MacArthur, the coauthor of *The Front Page* with Hecht and a former reporter under Howey for the *Herald and Examiner*, claimed that the police would prevent rival newspapers from taking photographs at crime scenes or would bring perpetrators for interrogation at a hotel near the Hearst headquarters. “The other papers howled with rage, but what could they do?” said MacArthur when interviewed for Howey’s obituary. “Walter had the resignations of half a dozen city officials in his desk to be used at his convenience.”²⁶

Murray explained his editor’s view of investigations: “Howey knew that such exposés would do no good, as far as reform is concerned. He was under no illusions about the intelligence of the ordinary citizen, or his capacity to remember from one day to the next which politicians are gypping him and how they are going about it. . . . Howey did not operate his paper by any code of ethics dreamed up at journalism school in an ivory tower full of idealistic professors. He ran it on the same basis as other businesses in the community operated.”²⁷



While the character of the Chicago news business had taken shape by the 1890s, the arrival of Hearst in 1900—a first step in his national strategy to become president—took things to a new level. That June, Hearst challenged business manager Solomon Carvalho to establish a Chicago paper in time for the Democratic National Convention in Kansas City, just thirty days away.

“It’s a tough town,” Carvalho had admonished. “We’ll have to shoot our way in.”

“Take all the ammunition you need,” Hearst replied.²⁸

His executives and their rivals would soon take those words literally.

Carvalho first deployed the same tactics that had worked so well in New York: he dropped calling cards on all the best editors and writers in the city and lured them in with salary hikes. He also offered the *American* for one penny, while the *Tribune* and the *Daily News* sold for three. The paper retained a network of tipsters that covered the train stations, hotels, hospitals, and police precincts across the city. When a lurid layout, shocking headlines, scoops, and sensationalized copy were deemed insufficient,

the editors exhorted legmen and rewrite men to concoct fiction. If a rival paper offered a better piece of fantasy—as in one account that featured firefighters saving lives by forming a human ladder—the reporter was shown the door. The *American* had twenty-seven city editors in its first thirty-seven months, in part because Hearst was using Chicago as a testing ground for talent and would send the best editors on elsewhere.²⁹

These efforts represented a good start, but in a city that already had nine daily newspapers, more was needed. The rough handling of newsboys was nothing new; brawls had been common, for example, in the Hearst-Pulitzer contest in New York. Carvalho, however, counted on the shrewd and dangerous Max Annenberg as circulation manager to win his war. Attired in his signature flaming red sweater with a soft cap pulled down over his brow, Annenberg organized crews of goons, many of them broken-down prizefighters, to secure the loyalty of news vendors district by district, using all necessary means of persuasion. In 1902 he was joined by his more sophisticated brother, Moses, who would pursue a lifelong career in newspaper publishing and rackets, the latter with his racetrack wire, the Nationwide News Service.³⁰

Though the *Daily News* and the *Tribune* fought back, the violence rarely became lethal until 1910, when the *Tribune* poured a million dollars into a circulation drive, dropped its price to a penny, and, taking a page from Hearst's playbook, poached the Annenberg brothers. They also armed their crews with revolvers. Hearst's lead executive, Andrew Lawrence, responded, and soon gunmen were stalking each other in black circulation trucks, pouring out for firefights in the streets. The *Inter-Ocean* published an editorial demanding indictments, but otherwise news of the bloodshed was suppressed—or falsified as labor troubles—by all of the newspapers except the *Daily Socialist* and the unionized *Daily World*.³¹

The hostilities peaked in 1912. In May the *Daily Socialist* reported the beating and kidnapping of a newsdriver. In June thugs shot a street conductor and then fired wildly through the crowded trolley. In July an assailant blasted bullets into the roof of a streetcar when he found that the passengers were not reading the *American*. Two weeks later, a gang riddled the Wellington Avenue elevated station to intimidate a newsdealer. Circulation crews were spotted wearing special police stars. Attempts to indict Max Annenberg and others ended in acquittals. "Bloody newspapers and bodies were a gruesome but not uncommon sight in the Chicago River," observed crime historian Rose Keefe.³²

The war began to sputter out by 1913, but incidents of violence continued for years as the circulation departments produced some of the city's most notorious killers, including the infamous Gentelman brothers; labor racketeer Maurice "Mossy" Enright; another of Prohibition's "dean of Chicago gunmen," Walter Stevens; "Big Tim" Murphy; Frank McErlane, described by the *Illinois Crime Survey* as "the most brutal gunman to ever pull a trigger in Chicago"; and James Ragen, who together with another slugger, Mickey McBride, would run childhood friend Moses Annenberg's Nationwide News Service in the 1930s.³³

"After their honorable discharge from the newspaper wars, all these gunmen and their many pupils opened shop on their own account, having acquired valuable lessons in typical corporation methods," wrote Ferdinand Lundberg in *Imperial Hearst*, his scathing 1936 biography. Most prominent among them was Dean "Deannie" O'Banion, a reigning bootlegger and friend of Hecht and MacArthur who had worked for Hearst until at least 1920, when Prohibition went into effect. In 1925 O'Banion was killed in his flower shop by the Johnny Torrio–Al Capone mob, an event that Hecht depicted in both *Underworld* and *Scarface*.³⁴

Though the circulation war was over, the *Front Page* era was still in full steam at the onset of the 1920s, a decade that would deliver unprecedented carnage and bloody spectacle. In 1918 Hearst merged his morning *Herald* with the newly acquired *Examiner* and put Howey in charge to create the paper that would earn a reputation as the most aggressive of the interwar period. "Nobody moved even to the water cooler except at a dead run," reporter Bob Casey said about the Hearst building, which became known as the Madhouse on Madison Street. "The city editor yelled at his copy readers, the copy readers yelled at the copy boys, and the copy boys yelled at each other. Each story, from a triple murder to a purse snatching in the ghetto, was a big story and greeted with quivering excitement by everyone who had anything to do with it." Columnist Arthur James Pegler observed, "A Hearst paper is like a screaming woman running down the street with her throat cut."³⁵

About the Author

Julien Gorbach spent most of his ten years as a daily newspaper reporter on the police beat, covering drive-by shootings and murder trials, and publishing an investigative series on killings that remained unsolved because gangs had intimidated witnesses into silence. As a freelancer, he contributed to the *Boston Phoenix*, *Time Out New York*, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, and the *New Orleans Gambit*, among other publications. He covered Hurricane Katrina for the *Boston Globe*. Gorbach earned a doctorate in media history at the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2013 and is now an assistant professor in the School of Communications at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.