

Fighting Words

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Fighting Words

THE BOLD AMERICAN JOURNALISTS
WHO BROUGHT THE WORLD HOME
BETWEEN THE WARS

Nancy F. Cott

BASIC BOOKS
New York

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*to Noah, Fiona, Nellie, and Leo
and their future on a green earth where truth-telling matters*



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Passport application photographs, first time traveling abroad.
SOURCE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION.

INTRODUCTION

DOROTHY THOMPSON HAD no fixed plans when she headed across the Atlantic in 1920. Nor did Vincent Sheean or John Gunther when they soon did the same—nor even Rayna Raphaelson when she crossed the Pacific to China. All were in their twenties, restless, eager to leave the United States for a foreign destination. Traveling independently, each of them started out with breathtaking casualness, unprepared for what might come and how to survive, sure only of needing to earn self-support and wanting “to write.”

From such uncertain beginnings each one created a momentous international career in journalism. Writing about distant political urgencies, they alerted fellow Americans to tie their own fates to that of the rest of the world. The impact of intrepid journalists in the decades between the two world wars has never been emphasized, although their reporting and commentary were essential in urging Americans to face global responsibilities in the mid-twentieth century.

Wherever they landed, each of the four met unstable circumstances. The first world war had smashed the international order and unprecedented military devastation still staggered much of the globe. Nearly ten million soldiers were gone, ten million more disabled with ghastly wounds; uncounted civilians were displaced or dead. Cities lay in ruins in Europe, with national economies blasted. Four empires had been demolished, and the Treaty of Versailles concluding

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the war set off new conflicts by redrawing international boundaries. Because the United States had suffered comparatively little in the war, emerging with a stable postwar economy and currency, unattached young Americans with little in their pockets could roam cheaply in the early 1920s. Whatever few dollars Americans brought with them would multiply in value across much of Europe and Asia. Even the ocean passage need not cost much, if comfort did not matter.

Young people with some education (though no money), desire for creative work, and curiosity about the global scene might easily gamble on going to live abroad as these four did. They formed part of a larger phenomenon rarely noticed: a surprisingly large proportion of their generation of Americans did go abroad to live and learn for some years between the two world wars. It was not rare. Between a quarter and a third of those in their twenties then—among Americans who would later become notable—lived in a foreign country for more than a year, often far longer, during the interwar decades. “The Spirit of the twenties was everywhere international and cosmopolitan,” one of them recalled; “the sign of the moment was Eros, defined by Plato as the soul stirring itself to life and motion.” Bringing their experiences home, these travelers (who came from all the regions and races and religions of the United States) influenced American knowledge and politics through the twentieth century. Their numbers and interests went far beyond the famous coterie of literary “expatriates” who lived for some years in France. Worldly exchanges sparked by their generation inspired cultural innovation and social movements, though only in the high arts has their importance been recognized.¹

The common presumption that Americans in the 1920s were “isolationist” has obscured the extent of foreign travel and residence among the younger generation. It’s true that the United States spurned membership in the new League of Nations and restricted immigration severely then, while successive Republican administrations looked to bolster business strength. Nonetheless, “isolationist” is a poor designation for the United States, with its intensifying worldwide financial and commercial commitments, its participation in

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international conferences and groups (even League of Nations committees), and a foreign policy tellingly concerned with global regions of potential economic advantage.²

Journalists were among the most peripatetic of the younger generation who, by exploring foreign perspectives, countered insular policies and provincial attitudes in the United States. Newspaper reporting abroad presented an obvious opportunity for venturers who needed to support themselves, as Dorothy Thompson, James Vincent Sheean, John Gunther, and Rayna Raphaelson did. Print ruled the world media then, and newspapers were ubiquitous in the United States. In the years following the first world war, American newspapers, magazines, and specialized weeklies had more staff abroad than ever before in peacetime. Major American papers had established foreign bureaus in European capitals during the world war; rather than dismantling them in the 1920s, they kept existing bureaus and added others elsewhere. Putting correspondents' eyes on the world made sense. International peace was still fragile, while American commercial interests spanned the globe and more Americans than ever before were traveling abroad. Even though most readers of American newspapers cared far more about local and national matters, owners of major papers sensed an international future and expanded their coverage to far parts of the world.³

From anticolonial conflict in northern Africa to China's Nationalist revolution, from Hitler's Berlin to Stalin's Moscow, one or more of the journalists in the chapters to come was on the spot as a witness, sending news of a changing globe. Retracing their paths reanimates the turbulent international era in which they thrived. Their writings ranged like searchlights across rising threats, shaping fellow Americans' awareness of critical trends. In Europe in the 1920s, they watched authoritarian leaders take hold in numerous countries. Fascism, founded by Benito Mussolini, made him prime minister of Italy by 1922 and "Il Duce" not long after; within a decade, looking around Europe, he expressed confidence that "the liberal state is destined to perish." The worldwide depression of the 1930s put

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capitalism as well as democracy into crisis and created more headway for dictators, including Adolf Hitler. The stakes in alerting American readers to this spreading menace were clear: the future of representative governments and the rule of law, taken for granted by most Americans, was imperiled.

Wide awake to that threat, Dorothy Thompson warily watched it grow. She began her stunning journalistic ascent from Vienna in 1921, leaving her small-town Methodist roots far behind. A modern woman whose marvelous determination made her a foreign correspondent, she was soon promoted to be chief of her newspaper's foreign bureau in Berlin—a post almost unheard of for a woman. Meanwhile she was falling head over heels for a European lover and marrying him. Her bold condemnation of Adolf Hitler in 1932 was among the first to make an impression; it would lead to her being the first American officially ejected from Nazi Germany two years later. She then grew even more influential as a fervent antifascist in her thrice-weekly political column for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Chicagoan John Gunther was already a newspaperman when he landed in London. Tall and blond, an “Adonis” in one woman's eyes, Gunther debated with himself for years whether he should write fiction instead of journalism. As a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News*, he roved across the globe, gaining friends and worthy contacts everywhere, until the grip of European politics made the decision for him. By 1930, a promotion put him in Vienna as foreign bureau chief for his newspaper, covering all the surrounding countries where authoritarianism had destroyed parliamentary rule. His subsequent move to book writing so swelled his transatlantic fame that he was credibly dubbed “the world's best-known newsman” before he turned forty.

Deadly upheavals in Palestine in 1929 brought Gunther together with James Vincent Sheean, cementing a friendship between the two. Sheean, who had grown up poor and Catholic in the midwestern sticks, relished daring hazards when he began as a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* in Paris in 1923. He barely escaped a

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court-martial in Spain, fatal capture in North Africa, and drowning in the Mediterranean—experiences of reporting that turned his politics strongly toward anti-imperialism. An individualist and autodidact who read in five languages, Sheean soon chafed at the objectivity expected of reporters. He took up a freelancer's precarious existence as his own political views sharpened, leaving behind a regular salary in order to write as he liked. After becoming a transatlantic celebrity at thirty-five by writing a book on his political learning curve, this self-styled "journeying man" never stopped moving.

Red-haired Rayna Raphaelson turned Sheean's life around in Hankou, China. She was a rebellious Jewish daughter from Chicago with curly hair so flaming red that it stopped people on the street. When the early end of her marriage drove her to China to start her life anew, she did not imagine how she would rise to influence as a journalist for the Chinese revolutionary Nationalists. Her decision to work in political journalism hid latent treacherous consequences—about which Sheean and Dorothy Thompson learned when their paths converged with hers in Moscow, on the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

All four of them took risks in intimacy as well as in their journalism as they navigated the globe. None of them adhered to conventional sexual standards, much less the expectations of their parents' generation. "People who were in their twenties in the 1920s were amazingly, perhaps unprecedentedly, immoral," Sheean coolly observed; they "created the extreme licentiousness that was the moral characteristic of the age."⁴ Their foreign scenarios included ups and downs with spouses and lovers, sexual encounters and affairs that were passionate and meaningful at best, but not always. Their public and private lives entwined. They were rethinking relationships between women and men, as much as between themselves and the world, as much as between peoples and political systems.

In chapters ahead, the political role of these journalists climaxes in the late 1930s. At that point Americans were acrimoniously split between putting "America First" or taking on international responsibilities.

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Today, troubling shadows of their era darken the world again. Americans are divided over the nation's role in the world (and much else), making the stability of American democracy appear fragile; authoritarian nationalist leaders in major foreign countries have risen to power, often with popular support, as in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Dictatorial states then clamped down on the power of the press, preventing freedom of speech and communication, mounting a formidable challenge to correspondents' aim to use the press to expose tyrannical actions. These techniques have been reprised today, along with shockingly powerful and insidious hazards unique to our digital era. Both then and now the integrity of the press in all its forms is the issue. Despite its distance from us in time, the story told here echoes fearsomely now.

CHAPTER 1

ORIGINAL ROVER BOY

JAMES VINCENT SHEEAN was a child of the twentieth century, born on its cusp in December 1899, in tiny Pana, Illinois. Always “Jimmy” among his friends, he made his name in print as Vincent Sheean, choosing at nineteen to sign an opera review that way, though he later said the name was a “mask” imposed on him by an editor. His doubling went beyond his nom de plume. His early colleagues at the *Chicago Tribune* in Paris could not decide whether he was “nothing but a playboy” or “nothing but a highbrow”—but agreed he was an extraordinary character. In college at the University of Chicago, John Gunther thought Sheean was “bizarre”: “He hummed Mozart, wore green pants, spoke better Italian than the Italian professors, read the Talmud, quoted Spinoza, learned German, borrowed money, admired dancing, and wrote a treatise on the Wahabis.” By the time Gunther dredged up that memory fifteen years later, the two men were good friends, and Gunther considered Sheean “perhaps the most remarkable American of my generation I know.”¹

RED-HAIRED AND BLUE-EYED, the grandson of four Irish immigrants, Sheean readily admitted “the map of Ireland in my face.” His small-town Catholic upbringing included attending a parochial

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school and then public high school. He worked a newspaper-delivery route and other odd jobs in his spare time, as did his four brothers. His father, a traveling salesman and unsteady breadwinner, did not favor Jimmy, but his loving mother, a schoolteacher, happily recited long stretches of Shakespeare, narrative poetry, and Abraham Lincoln's addresses aloud for his pleasure. Never an attentive student in school—nor an athlete, although he grew to be six-foot-two—Sheean was an autodidact whose favorite activity was reading. He read his way through Pana's public library, gulping one author's works whole and then moving along the alphabet to the next, from Austen to Dickens, from Hugo to Twain. He wrote stories, essays, and poems from the age of six and by ten was ghostwriting his older brothers' term papers.²

The United States was a land of readers then, with a high and still growing literacy rate and a widespread assumption that reading led to self-improvement and thus to success. Both information and amusement came from the printed page. In Sheean's childhood and adolescence, there was no radio to listen to, certainly no TV; nothing like internet had been envisioned. The silent cinema could be seen in larger towns, but probably not in Pana. Stimulation outside of books arrived live, in lectures, musical and dramatic performances, circuses, political harangues, clerical instruction. From the nuns in his parochial school, Sheean learned to love classical music, and performers on the Chautauqua circuit ignited his lifelong passion for opera.³

Omnivorous reading spurred Sheean's imagination to travel far beyond the small town of Pana, preparing him, wittingly or not, for the life he would eventually lead. With remarkable initiative he studied foreign languages so that he could read favorite European authors in the original. A priest recently arrived from Europe who spoke better French than English taught French to Sheean and a Lutheran pastor helped him with his study of German; he taught himself Italian from a textbook ordered from a Sears, Roebuck catalog and bolstered his ability in conversations with an immigrant fruit merchant. A misfit in his surroundings, Sheean had teenage

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acquaintances who thought he was a wit and a charmer, but more who found his “talking like a book” difficult to understand.

One exceptional high school teacher, Helen Mills, opened “a door into a world of freedom” for him. Her mentorship signaled that “it was possible to use not only the whole of your wits but the whole of your vocabulary—that vocabulary which, like a miser’s hoard, you spent your entire life accumulating and were always afraid to use,” he later wrote in autobiographical fiction. She urged Sheean to enter the University of Chicago’s scholarship competition for local high school students. Examination in just one subject sufficed—fortunate for him, because his enthusiasms were so skewed toward literature. He finished eighth out of the 289 students taking the test in English literature and won a partial scholarship.⁴

In the fall of 1917 Sheean arrived at the university, “a freshman awed by stone and mortar, seventeen years young.” As a would-be writer, he went out for the student newspaper, the *Daily Maroon*, right away, but his dedication was episodic at best. A poor Irish kid from a small town, always suffering “anemia of the pocket-book,” as he admitted, he set his eyes on social rather than academic success, becoming a social climber and feeling triumphant making friends among the stars of the undergraduate social scene. Yet he also felt like an impostor. He veered back and forth between smug delight in being accepted by students of wealth and position and disgust with himself for caring. More than once he acknowledged that his “aim of being ‘prominent in college’” was “terribly barren”—but it was the golden ring on the merry-go-round that he reached for.⁵

One early episode so burned his memory that he recounted it years later when fascism was marching across Europe. He and his roommate both agreed to pledge a fraternity without knowing that it was a predominantly Jewish house. When a female acquaintance explained to him that it would be socially fatal to associate with Jews, Sheean and his roommate buckled to the widespread prejudice. In the middle of pledge night, they escaped out of an upper-story window of the fraternity house and ran away. He knew the decision was

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shameful, but it expressed his priorities at the time. Though Sheean blasted the fraternity system as “invented by the demon of social position to plague college men with the corrosive infection of exclusiveness,” that did not keep him from joining another one later.⁶

Moving into campus housing after the escape, he lived down the hall from a graduate student named Fred Millett, who became his confidant. Millett called Sheean “ill-balanced” as a freshman—a “prodigy” intellectually, “almost a wreck” physically, and “a chameleon” emotionally. Millett happened to know Sheean’s high school teacher Helen Mills and reported to her that Sheean was “brilliant socially”: “he can be & usually is, very charming, but his egotism & his heartlessness make him frequently and tho[ugh]tlessly brutal to people who like him.”⁷

Sheean was not cut out for standard academic achievement. He chose mostly “snap” courses in literature, never studied, and skipped class almost as often as he attended—scraping through (when he did) by impressing a professor with his French accent or pulling off an acutely intelligent paper. His poems won him election to the Poetry Club, where he met leading lights of Chicago modernism and silently ridiculed other students’ pomposity. He cared more about hearing the Chicago opera without paying for a ticket. As a freshman, he volunteered as an usher but could not afford the repeated cost of the starched collars and cuffs that ushers were required to wear. As a sophomore in 1918, until the November end of the world war he was admitted free when wearing his uniform from the Student Army Training Corps, a military preparedness unit required of male college students. Later he became the *Maroon*’s music and theater critic for the free tickets.⁸

When the Student Army Training Corps ended, Sheean did not immediately return to school. Needy and in debt, after first sampling two unendurable jobs he got a part-time position reporting for the Chicago *Herald-Examiner*—a natural for him as an aspiring writer. Newspaper reporting was a lucky-break field and opened doors for creative talent. The long American tradition of creative

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writers supporting themselves as journalists included Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Fannie Hurst, and Jack London, among others. No specific credentials were required to become a reporter—only the drive to do it and ability to write a decent line. Satirist H. L. Mencken “wormed his way in” to writing for the *Baltimore Morning Herald* when he was nineteen, for example, by hanging around the office until he got an assignment. Typical conditions were gritty, the lives of cub reporters unglamorous, and their pay low, but the work offered spectacle, mobility, and the outside chance of influencing masses of people.⁹

Jobs existed everywhere, because newspapers flooded the American landscape. In 1920, approximately twenty-five hundred daily papers were published (in eleven thousand towns), circulating nearly thirty-two million copies every day plus sixteen million copies of Sunday-only editions, while American households numbered under twenty-five million. Today not even thirteen hundred dailies circulate, though the American population has tripled. Then, large cities had four or more dailies, plus Sunday papers, weeklies, monthlies, and innumerable special-interest, foreign-language, and ethnic-group newspapers. Many smaller cities and towns supported both a morning and evening daily, plus less-frequent papers. Ninety-five percent of Americans in the 1920s read newspapers, according to a large-scale national study.¹⁰

When Sheean got his job, Chicago was a newspaper-reading city of 2.7 million inhabitants, where four papers together sold over 1.4 million copies every day. The *Herald-Examiner's* circulation of three hundred thousand was the smallest. Publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst created the paper in 1918 by merging his Chicago *Examiner* with the *Record-Herald*, adding the newcomer to the growing Hearst chain. Over the previous twenty-five years, competition between Hearst and innovative publisher Joseph Pulitzer (whom Hearst copied) had transformed newspapers into vehicles of entertainment as well as of varied information. Joseph Pulitzer had noticed

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that masses of readers bought nineteenth-century penny papers for their sensational or sentimental stories, and he applied that approach when he founded the *New York World* in 1883, intending to appeal to a broad working-class public. The *World* investigated and condemned institutional corruption while its “human interest” stories blared melodramatic headlines such as “ALL FOR A WOMAN’S LOVE.” Crime, sports, scandal, and violence crowded its pages.

Hearst imitated and went beyond Pulitzer, while buying up newspaper after newspaper. His chain sat on the sensational side of the American newspaper spectrum. One day, for instance, Sheean had to go to Chicago’s North Side to look “for the body of a six year old girl who had been diddled with by a low-life sex-hound at the Virginia Hotel and then made away with.” Competition between Hearst and Pulitzer led to both adding diversions—puzzles, large drawings, comic strips, opinion pages, household advice, lovelorn columns—that then swept through the industry. By the 1920s, almost every major newspaper carried humor and advice columns, photographs, comics, Sunday rotogravure sections with high-quality half-tone images, and—a new rage—the crossword puzzle.¹¹

But Sheean gave little time to the *Herald-Examiner* when he returned to school in the fall of 1919. He was consumed with writing an operetta for the competition run by Blackfriars, a male-only musical comedy club on campus. He and his coauthor won the prize, leading to public performance of the musical in May 1920. Sheean’s celebrity made him “deliriously happy,” he wrote to Fred Millett, who was no longer on campus. He circulated mostly among people of privilege. “I play around with only two or three girls,” he told Millett, all “very nice” and “very wealthy . . . so I am almost in the position of a kept man.” For the summer of 1920 he was asked to tutor the seventeen-year-old son of a meatpacking baron. The position put him among the family’s rich friends in Lake Forest, Illinois, and then at a dude ranch in the Bighorn Mountains, horseback riding and hobnobbing with Bostonians from Harvard. Staring him in the face, nonetheless, were his “Debts. Debts. Debts. Everywhere debts.”¹²

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Sheean registered for school in the fall despite having been through “a cyclone of reaction” against his “dawdling, supercilious, superficial life.” He stayed because he was in love with his coauthor of the Blackfriars operetta. Though Sheean dallied with women during college, he fell passionately only for men. He could speak openly about this with Fred Millett, his “midnight confessor, guide, philosopher, and friend” in freshman year, because Millett, too, loved men. Millett “played a most important part in the operation of opening my young mind,” Sheean said a dozen years later. “It would have happened in any case, but the fact is that Fred B. Millett did it.” While still in college Sheean playfully baited the older man, “Some day you can ruin me, if you like—when I’m extremely successful and famous—by divulging all that you know.” He was kidding, but speaking the truth. Erotic ties between men were considered a species of moral degeneracy in academia (as elsewhere) and were very, very severely punished. Sheean knew he absolutely had to hide his sensibilities in public. But he took risks. As a senior, he skipped freshman rush at his fraternity while conceding to Millett sardonically, “But then—who knows?—I may meet my Fate. I’ve met my Fate—Oh, how many times, in the past three years and a half! And still I live.”¹³

In letters, Sheean told Millett about one crush after another. One, “a Galahad child,” was supposedly irresistible to the whole fraternity—“it’s the ‘universal disease’ in Phi Gam,” he reported. Fraternities incubated same-sex eroticism without determining anyone’s eventual sexual path. Whether Sheean understood his erotic attraction to men as deeply part of his identity is impossible to determine. He described his crushes—“such a dear fresh young thing” or “the blue-eyed fair-haired innocent”—in the standard literary language of boy-girl romances. Nor did he limit himself to men, apparently: though when one boyfriend “actually wept” because Sheean “went in to a harlot,” he promised not to “‘screw’ as they call it.”¹⁴

A tall, good-looking young man always in need of money, Sheean was not averse to opportunistic encounters. “My head teems with intrigues to get money,” he wrote desperately to Millett at one point.