

# *The American* MERCURY

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## TEN YEARS

MY RETIREMENT from the editorship of THE AMERICAN MERCURY, to take effect at the end of the present year, was announced on October 6, and is thus stale news to the readers of these pages. A good many of them, in fact, have long since sent me pleasant words of farewell, and from several I have received more material certificates of goodwill, including two cases of beer. My thankfulness to all of them needs no saying, nor my natural regret on severing so charming and stimulating a relationship. But I am firmly convinced that magazines, like governments, are benefited by rotation in office, and I am carrying out that principle by yielding to Mr. Henry Hazlitt.

Of his qualifications for the post there will be plenty of evidence immediately. He is fourteen years younger than I am, but he has behind him a varied and rich experience in the editorial chair, and that

experience fits him peculiarly for the work ahead of him. He is the only competent critic of the arts that I have ever heard of who was at the same time a competent economist, of practical as well as theoretical training, and he is one of the few economists in human history who could really write. Thus he is extraordinarily well equipped for the business which faces him, for the big show in America, during the next few years, will be carried on mainly in the economic ring, and if it is to be dealt with according to the taste of the readers of THE AMERICAN MERCURY it must be dealt with boldly, gracefully and with not too much solemnity.

In case there be any among those readers who fear that the change of editorial administration will convert the magazine into something that it is not they may put their minds at ease. In its basic aims and principles there will be little change. Hereafter, as in the past, it will try to play

a bright light over the national scene, revealing whatever is amusing and instructive, but avoiding mere moral indignation as much as possible. There are reasons for believing that the United States, as it stands, might be improved, but there is certainly no reason for complaining of it as a spectacle. That spectacle fascinates Mr. Hazlitt as it has always fascinated me. He will try to discern and set forth its changing phases as I have done. The only difference will be that he will bring a fresher eye to the enterprise, and kinds of discernment that lie outside my equipment. He was my first and only choice for the post he takes, and I am completely convinced that he will make a first-rate magazine.



My reasons for clearing out are not, of course, purely theoretical—that is, they are not based wholly upon the doctrine that ten years is long enough for one editor to serve. I believe in that doctrine thoroughly, and have put it into practice twice, once in the case of the *Smart Set* and now with THE AMERICAN MERCURY; but I am also moved by an eager desire to devote more of my time to other undertakings, some of which have been luring me for a long while, often to my acute impatience and discomfort.

The main one is the writing of some books. There was a time when all of my books were simply reworkings of magazine and newspaper articles, and putting them together was thus a relatively easy matter. But with my “Treatise on the Gods”, begun in 1927, I ventured into fields outside the periodical range, and it soon became apparent that the hard study and continuous application that such work demanded were hardly compatible with the daily duties of a magazine editor. It

took me three years to write “Treatise on the Gods”, for the only time I had to give it was an occasional evening, and books of its kind cannot be written comfortably on occasional evenings. Its successor, “Treatise on Right and Wrong”, has been under way since 1930, and should have been finished long ago. Now I’ll be free to push it to quick completion, for despite my difficulties three-fifths of it is done, and the rest is blocked out.

I go into these details because many readers of THE AMERICAN MERCURY have been polite enough to show some interest in my plans for the future, and my gratitude to them for their ten years of unflinching support induces me to think of them as friends. I have a schedule of writing that will keep me busy for at least five years to come, and at fifty-three it is perhaps imprudent for any man to look further ahead. The books, I hope, will roll out without any more delay, some of them new ones, long planned, and the rest extensive revisions and amplifications of old ones—for example, “The American Language”, which promises to run to two volumes in its next incarnation. For recreation in the intervals of labor I propose to travel, for the world grows more interesting to me every day, and though I have seen rather more of it than most I am still eager to see and savor what is left.



My obligations are many—to the capable and diligent staff of the magazine, to its large corps of contributors (more than 600 in all), to the advertisers who have sustained it in fair weather and foul, and above all, to its body of faithful readers, many of whom have been on its books since the first issue in January, 1924. I have had the pleasure of meeting some of these readers, and have been in correspon-

dence with many more. I have marvelled at times at their patience with my aberrations, and can only offer them my thanks for keeping the magazine going, and for giving me, these ten years, the fun of editing it.

THE AMERICAN MERCURY started out as something considerably more modest than what it has become. When Mr. Knopf and I made our first plans for it we had in mind a magazine of about 20,000 circulation, appealing to a relatively small class of readers, and devoting its attention mainly to the arts. But after the first issue it was plain that many more people were interested in it than we had counted on, and since then it has made a secure place for itself in what may be called the upper bracket of American magazines, and as its scope has widened it has increased in circulation. Not many of its contemporaries have been quoted so often in the newspapers,

and none other has got so much attention in foreign countries.

I am naturally glad that I can leave it in such good hands. It may be that, from time to time, Mr. Hazlitt will be hospitable and enlightened enough to print me, but that is a matter for the future to determine. He is to be editor in fact as well as in name, and my position will be precisely that of any other contributor. My conduct of *The Library* ceases with this issue, and I won't pretend to be sorry, for it began in the *Smart Set* in 1908, and has thus been running twenty-five years. How many books I have reviewed in that time, God alone knows—probably at least four thousand, for I used to plow through whole shelves of them in an issue. My belief is that I have endured enough for the swell letters of my native land. It is now time for other, and perhaps even worse critics to take over the job.

H. L. MENCKEN

# THE MYSTERY OF RETAIL PRICE

BY DANE YORKE

**D**URING one of the recurrent protests of American industry against the competition of foreign-made goods it was the high privilege of the Hon. Andrew W. Mellon to transmit to the Senate Finance Committee a report embodying a large mass of data upon that great evil. As may be remembered, Mr. Mellon was then "the greatest Secretary of the Treasury since Alexander Hamilton," and the report was in his best manner. It was comfortingly detailed, it was marvellously precise; it was also quite vague upon most really important points. But it proved what American industry wished to be proved: *i.e.*, the damnable nature of the foreign selling going on in the American retail markets.

That report was compiled in 1922 as an aftermath of the business collapse of 1921. Its actual leg-work was done by zealous New York consumers (at the instigation of representatives of the Senate Finance Committee), and it thus anticipated by eleven years the work of the present NRA consumer boards. A happy Spring shopping trip through the great Manhattan stores resulted in the purchase of 122 different articles of foreign merchandise, which were then turned over to the appraiser's office of the Port of New York. From the customs records the appraiser determined the cost (in American currency) of each article in the country of its origin, the cost of bringing it to this country, and the duty paid under the

American tariff—all of which, added together, gave the total "landed cost." This figure was then subtracted from the retail price paid by the shoppers and the result set down, in percentage, as the profit-spread. The highest figure shown was 2588% on a card of twelve little buttons whose full landed cost was less than a penny, but which sold in New York for twenty-five cents. But a humble bottle of cod-liver oil from Norway, bought in a store for \$1.25, was found to show an advance of 1774% on its landed cost of about 7 cents.

The report noted the store of purchase for each article, and the emporium of R. H. Macy & Company was honored by being the most frequently mentioned. Twelve different articles came from Macy's, and their spread between landed cost and Macy price ran from 160% to 1012%, with an average of about 325%. Nor was everything that was bought small stuff. One shopper bought from Macy's a china dinner set of 100 pieces whose complete landed cost (including duty at the rate of 55%, or \$11.80) was found to be only \$35.30—but which Macy's had sold for the round sum of \$134.

There were other big fish caught in the same net. The great Fifth Avenue store of Altman's, built from a pedlar's pack, was found to be selling for \$150 a pearl necklace whose total landed cost (including the duty of \$4.28) was only \$18.26. And the high-toned mart of John Wana-