

WOOLLCOTT, A MINORITY REPORT

BY BENNETT CERF

THE temptation to forget a man's faults after his death, and to over-emphasize his deeds and contributions, is understandable enough. "Do not speak ill of the dead" is a maxim to which almost everybody subscribes. In the case of Alexander Woollcott, however, this glorifying process, it seems to me, is assuming the proportions of deification. His letters have been collected by loving friends (who took good care to leave out the more waspish and vitriolic ones), members of his family are composing elegies for sundry magazines, and now Samuel Hopkins Adams, his old fellow alumnus and sponsor from Hamilton, is writing a biography which may be expected to give the great Woollcott myth another shot in the arm.

Not even Woollcott's worst enemies — a goodly assemblage with representatives in every city and hamlet that the Master hit in the course of his wanderings — will deny that he was an extraordinary man who made a genuine contribution to the gaiety of the nation. He was a superb story teller, although he often padded his tales with whimsy-whamsy of the

most appalling variety. He fought with no holds barred for the things he believed in, although he could become as much aroused in a defense of Minnie Madden Fiske as for an all-out campaign against fascism. He truly loved the theatre, and his unbounded enthusiasm helped some really good plays to catch on with the public. He turned several books into best-sellers single-handed, although a summary of the titles reveals all too clearly a taste that was most erratic, if not downright over-sentimental and second-rate. (A few of his more violent enthusiasms: *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush*, *The Chicken Wagon Family*, *Lost Horizon*, *Goodbye Mr. Chips*.)

One of the prerequisites for his idea of a masterpiece was its discovery by himself. A new play or book that was recommended by somebody else was usually doomed in advance. When he raved about something and the whole world did not echo his sentiment, Woollcott became truly convinced he had discovered a classic and embarked upon a crusade that stopped at nothing. George Macy had the temerity to appoint him a co-judge for the

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Readers Club with Sinclair Lewis, Clifton Fadiman and Carl Van Doren. He never agreed with them on anything; the oftener they rejected some of his weird proposals, the harder he would thump for them at the next meeting. Because of him, they finally changed the whole procedure governing selections.

Woollcott's manners, atrocious to begin with, became progressively worse when he discovered how much people were willing to take from a great celebrity. *The Man Who Came to Dinner* crystallized and enhanced the Woollcott myth a hundred fold; it turned his insults into high comedy, and undoubtedly prevented his being socked in the jaw at least twice a week. His closest friends forgave him his rudeness, his bad sportsmanship, his failure to understand the very fundamentals of fair play. True, Harpo Marx dubbed him "just a big dreamer with a remarkable sense of double-entry bookkeeping." Noel Coward addressed him as "Little Nell of Old Dreary." Robert Benchley called him "Louisa M. Woollcott." To George Jean Nathan he was the "Seidlitz Powder of Times Square." Charlie Brackett swore that he wouldn't even talk to a man who wouldn't make a good magazine article; Heywood Brown added that an exception might be made for sycophantic souls who would play ghost to his Hamlet—and *never* step out of character. Edna Ferber averred that he was just "a New Jersey Nero who mistook his pinafore for a toga."

These, mind you, were Woollcott's friends. What some of the myriad of people he had insulted in one way or another called him may be left to the reader's imagination. Woollcott rather liked being called bad names by his friends; common salutations among the little set he bullied and bellwethered were, "Oh it's you, you fawn's behind," or "Who is this harpy standing here like the kiss of death," or "Get out, repulsive. You are beginning to disgust me." Such shenanigans he considered the height of humor. Let somebody outside the charmed circle take a swipe at him, however, and Woollcott reacted like so many other people who specialize in lampooning and mocking others. When his old friend Harold Ross, editor of the *New Yorker*, ran a profile of him by Woollcott Gibbs that told a few unpleasant truths, Woollcott went into a monumental rage, and didn't speak to him again for years.

II

Alexander Woollcott was born in 1887, in Phalanx, New Jersey, in a settlement that had once been dedicated to community, or cooperative living. The experiment hadn't worked, and Woollcott's grandfather had taken over the property. In 1889, the Woollcotts moved to Kansas City, where, according to Gibbs, little Alec developed such a knack for bellowing when he was hurt that a group of bullies formed a syndicate to exploit his talent. When they saw an adult ap-

proaching, they would throw Alec off the veranda of his home onto his head. He bawled so hard that the passerby frequently gave him a nickel as hush money. The gang then took the nickel. Woollcott swore that this story was a malicious lie.

In 1897 the Woollcotts moved to Philadelphia, and Alec attended Central High School there. Classmates were Ed Wynn and Harry Scherman, the guiding genius of the Book-of-the-Month Club. The three lads had little in common. Woollcott chose Hamilton College, in Clinton, New York, as his alma mater because he had been impressed by the worldly manner of a graduate of that institution. He had a fine time there, and Hamilton, along with the Seeing Eye, Mrs. Fiske, the Marx Brothers, Laura Richards, Ruth Gordon, Rebecca West, Sibyl Colfax, Dr. Eckstein and a few assorted articulate murderers and yegg-men became the greatest enthusiasms of his declining years.

As an undergraduate, he edited the college magazine, and starred in female rôles in the dramatic club productions. To a snowbound group in his dormitory he introduced the game of choosing for each person on the campus the one adjective which fitted him more perfectly than any other. He pointed out that, if the proper selections were made, everybody could be identified from the list of adjectives. For himself he selected "noble," but admitted later that "this was voted down in favor of another which reduced the whole episode in his

memoirs to the proportions of a disagreeable incident." When he graduated, Sam Adams gave him a letter of introduction to Carr Van Anda of the *New York Times*, where, after vain efforts to attune his expanding bulk and personality to the requirements of news reporting, he was given a whack at drama reviewing as a last resort. That was in 1914. It was the beginning of Woollcott's period of glory. A new despot came into his own.

Following a brief interlude as reporter for *Stars and Stripes* in France in 1918, where he wrote stories in the manner of Ernie Pyle with an over-larding of Elsie Dinmore, Mr. W. settled down for an indefinite run as the country's most respected drama critic, most relentless and feared gossip, and infinitely most accomplished raconteur. All three qualities made a radio career inevitable, and as "the Town Crier" Woollcott became famous, wealthy and more ruthless and domineering than ever.

His social life was unbelievably complicated. He summoned whom-ever he willed to his home on East Fifty-second Street (named "Wit's End" by Dorothy Parker); surprisingly few refused. He spent weeks at the White House, and told the Roosevelts whom to have in to dine with him. He spoke at department store book fairs, autographing copies of his own anthologies, and insulting his audience and other authors who appeared with him. He bought an island in Vermont, charged his guests hotel

rates, and banished them when they wouldn't play croquet, cribbage, or hearts according to his own special rules. He installed a big double bed in the ground-floor guest room of this island retreat. It was comfortable but creaky, letting out a tell-tale groan when anybody moved in it. Woollcott called it the "informative double." His opinions became more and more didactic, his prose style more lush and untrammelled.

The Man Who Came to Dinner was the direct result of a typical Woollcottian sojourn at Moss Hart's new Bucks County estate. He bullied the servants, condemned the food, invited friends of his own from Philadelphia to Sunday dinner, and wrote in Hart's guest book, "This is to certify that on my first visit to Moss Hart's house I had one of the most unpleasant times I ever spent." He also suggested that Moss write a play in which he could star. The next day Hart was describing Woollcott's behavior to George Kaufman. "Wouldn't it have been horrible," he ruminated, "if he had broken a leg or something and been on my hands the rest of the summer!" The collaborators looked at each other with dawning delight in their faces and took the cover off the typewriter.

Some months later, Woollcott fulfilled a lecture date in Newark, and wheedled Hart into driving him over and back. "I'll do it on one condition," proposed Hart. "I once clerked in a bookstore in Newark and I'd like to show them that I'm a big shot now. I want you to let me sit on the

platform with you, and be introduced to the audience." When they entered the hall there was a single folding chair, sure enough, to the left of the speaker's table. Hart sat down, and began crossing and uncrossing his legs, while Woollcott delivered his lecture without making the slightest reference to him. At its conclusion, he said, "I usually have a question period at this time but tonight we'll dispense with it. I'm sure you'd all want to know the same thing: who is this foolish looking young man seated here on the platform with me?" With this he retired, leaving Hart to get out of the hall as best he might!

Woollcott's last years were devoted principally to playing himself in a road company of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. The rigors of the trip, coupled with the heart strain induced by a strenuous diet that lopped off over fifty pounds, weakened him to such an extent that he was prey to the slightest ailment. When he felt death approaching, the spluttering vindictiveness went out of his writing; he began to make peace with the world, and to write conciliatory notes to long-time enemies. He even made up with Harold Ross. This lent weight to the contention of his friends that at heart he never was quite the irascible, ill-mannered tyrant he pretended to be. He was stricken in the midst of a broadcast in New York; his last words were a bitter denunciation of weak-minded sentimentalists who were willing to make a soft peace with Germany.

III

Woollcott was a confirmed bachelor, whose only known romances were of a literary variety, or the plain hero-worship he bestowed on great ladies of the stage. Edna Ferber, departing for Europe one summer, declared, "I want to be alone on this trip. I don't expect to talk to a man or woman — just Alec Woollcott." Rebecca West wrote in a copy of one of her books that she sent him, "I append my married name to remind us both to keep our passion in bounds;" she was only joking, of course. The paucity of his own love life did not prevent his superintending the amours of his little circle, plotting the career of a protégé named Frode Jensen, or suggesting the steps to be taken in the bringing up of his four nieces. When one of them, Nancy, was twelve, her friends whipped up a magazine and rejected her every prose and poetry contribution promptly and firmly. Alec was as indignant as Nancy. He heartily approved when she inserted a paid advertisement (cost: six cents cash) which read as follows:

<p>MISS NANCY B. WOOLLCOTT THE MOST CHARMING WOMAN IN THE WORLD CALL BETWEEN 2:30 AND 3</p>

When Nancy and her sisters visited their uncle, his grand manner and famous friends awed them completely. They reported to their hor-

rified mother that he had a portrait of himself reading on the toilet set right into the tiles of his bathroom, entitled "Laxation and Relaxation." They also were present when Ross, who has a lamentable gap between his front teeth, asked Woollcott's man for some dental floss. "Never mind floss," said Woollcott airily. "Bring him a hawser!" Woollcott was very proud of these nieces until they began to criticize him. One winter he sent his friends one of his slushy, raving notes — not about a book, play, or favorite charity this time, but a brand of whiskey. He was paid handsomely for the effort. The Lord knows what he would have said had any of his friends stooped to such commercial prostitution. The nieces sent him a note reading: "Buy stocks on margin if you must, but don't trail the family name in the dust!" In a sharp note to their father, Mr. W. remarked that if he could discover which of the nieces had dared perpetrate such sacrilege, he "would break her goddam neck!"

Woollcott accompanied Edna Ferber to an auction one afternoon. Suddenly she spied her mother, and made the mistake of hailing her by an uplifted hand. There was a crash of the auctioneer's hammer, and Miss Ferber discovered that she had become the owner of a particularly hideous grandfather's clock. Every time Woollcott told the story, the price of the clock was a little higher. On the George Kaufmans' fifth wedding anniversary (in 1922) he wrote them, "I have been looking around for an ap-

appropriate wooden gift, and am pleased hereby to present you with Elsie Ferguson's performance in her new play." When Gertrude Stein visited New York in 1933, she dared to dispute a statement of the great Mr. W. "I will forgive you this once," he said grandly. "You have not been here long enough yet to know that *nobody* disputes me!" "Woollcott," said Miss Stein with a hearty laugh, "You are a colossal fool!" The host, who happened to be myself, rolled off his chair with delight.

One evening I brought to a dinner party a lovely young lady whose aunt and uncle are both well-known California novelists. Woollcott was playing cribbage with Alice Duer Miller, and couldn't be bothered with rising from his seat. He inspected her coolly, however, and deigned to remark, "I know your aunt and uncle, of course. Your aunt is a splendid woman. Your uncle is an obscenity." (I borrow here a Hemingway device to indicate a four letter word that is not used in family magazines.) The young lady won my heart by replying, "My definition of that word, Mr. Woollcott, is a man who uses it to a lady he is meeting for the first time!" I'll say for Woollcott that he threw back his head and roared with approving laughter.

My own relations with him were severed by the Random House edition of Marcel Proust. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff, the translator of the first six parts, died before he could complete his task. After long deliberation and

consultation, we selected Frederick A. Blossom to translate the seventh and last of the Proust novels. Every critic approved his work but Woollcott, who launched into a tirade in the *New Yorker*, and made statements that enabled us to prove publicly that he didn't know what he was talking about. This was the sort of thing Woollcott couldn't forgive. One thing led to another, and finally I struck his name from the Random House review list. I made a perfect picture of a man cutting his nose to spite his face — because Woollcott's enthusiasms could make a book a bestseller more surely than anything else. I think it only fair to tell this story here, to indicate that this report is not exactly impartial, and that my recollections of Mr. Woollcott are not set down with what might be termed Olympian detachment.

While George Kaufman and Moss Hart were working on *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, Hart went to stay with Woollcott to study him once more at first hand. Hart has an insatiable curiosity for reading messages not intended for his eyes, an idiosyncrasy that did not escape Woollcott's attention. One morning Hart was busy devouring several of Mr. W's missives, not yet stamped and addressed, when he found one that read, "I'll ask you up here just as soon as I can get rid of that nauseating Moss Hart, who hangs on here like a leech, although he knows how I detest him." Hart was beginning to quiver with rage when he came to the postscript which

read, "Moss, my puss: I trust this will cure you of the habit of reading other people's mail!"

In the early thirties, Woollcott visited Russia, where he created a great commotion because of his striking resemblance to the bloated capitalist invariably depicted in Soviet cartoons. He weighed over two hundred pounds at the time; Soviet citizens had seen nothing like him since the fall of the Czars. Their hoots of laughter did not increase his love for the Russian experiment. ("Hoot" is used advisedly; one Moscow journalist declared that Woollcott looked exactly like an owl!) In England, Woollcott attended a small dinner given in honor of Edward, then Prince of Wales. He was deeply flattered when the Prince called him into private consultation after the ladies had left the room, but his elation vanished when the reason became apparent. "Woollcott," said the Prince, "you've got something to do with that blasted *New Yorker* magazine, haven't you? Well, why the devil do my copies reach me so irregularly?"

Later Woollcott visited Japan, where he was made so much of that he came back home with an overflowing heart. He raved about their "neatness and love of flowers — the sweet hum of their voices and the occasional deep boom of a vast gong at a temple on a

hill." He then ventured an opinion on our "future war with Japan," of which "he heard nothing from the Japanese — but in the bar of the Pekin Club, or in the veranda café of a Pacific liner, or among our own Army and Navy officers who are stationed in the Far East and have a lot of time on their hands." "I only hope," he concluded, "that if there ever is such a war and we win it, we shall remember that we won it because we are larger, richer, and more numerous, and not feel too proud about it. For I have seen just enough of Japan and the Japanese to suspect that such a victory might be only another of history's insensitive triumphs of quantity over quality!"

Well, more profound folk than the ingenuous Mr. Woollcott were taken in by the wily little Japs, and maybe it isn't quite fair to bring the matter up. At least, Woollcott lived to learn how wrong he had been.

All of his life, Alec Woollcott raged because people insisted on confusing his beloved Hamilton College, at Clinton, with Colgate University, at Hamilton, New York, not many miles away. When he died, he stipulated that his ashes be deposited in the Hamilton cemetery. David Beetle, editor of the *Hamilton Alumni magazine*, reports that, by the irony of fate, they were shipped first to Colgate, and had to be readdressed.



GERMAN PLANS FOR THE NEXT WAR

BY HENRY C. WOLFE

THE Nazis have taken military defeat into their calculations. Years before Hitler invaded Poland they were planning what to do if their armies, planes and U-boats should be beaten. In their long-range program for world domination, military defeat in World War II is provisional. It is an episode that ends one stage of a long, continuing campaign. In the Nazi grand strategy, ultimate victory may be a matter of another generation.

The Nazis count on turning even military defeat to their advantage. They have already turned the war to their advantage by making much of Europe over, in line with their long-range economic, social and military program. They have made provision to carry out that program regardless of what happens to Hitler and the other present Nazi leaders.

Eight years ago I heard Erich Koch, Gauleiter of East Prussia, forecast the Nazi campaign. "We shall beat you by one means or another," he warned me. "We are at war with your bourgeois civilization. The methods we use will be dictated by circumstances. At times we may fight you on the

battlefield; at other times it will be a war of ideas. We may suffer defeats; you may win victories. Or at least you will *think* you have won. But our will is stronger than yours. And in the end we shall smash you!"

We were sitting in the Gauleiter's office in Koenigsberg. Herr Koch made no bones about Nazi intentions. Yes, he and his colleagues might go down in the process of war against Germany's enemies. The Führer, Himmler, Goebbels — all the top-ranking Nazis took that into account. But, by that time, he maintained, Nazism as a faith and in practice would have made such headway in the Reich and neighboring countries that not even a crushing military defeat could liquidate it.

A year later in Berlin I talked with Alfred Rosenberg, director of the Foreign Affairs Section of the Nazi Party. Dr. Rosenberg was less direct than Herr Koch. He was ponderous and mystical. At the end of a long interview I pressed him into answering the question: How can Germany win? "We can destroy our enemies along with ourselves," he answered. "If we

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