

## ROSS OF THE NEW YORKER

BY ALLEN CHURCHILL

**H**AROLD ROSS, who has been editor of the *New Yorker* ever since he originated it in 1925, is one of the most incongruous figures ever to walk on the American literary scene. The *New Yorker*, as everybody knows, is the sophisticated magazine designed for smart New Yorkers and read by smart people everywhere. Ross, however, is a walnut-faced, gap-toothed, frontier roughneck who might have been expected to land in almost any berth but the one he chose. The contrasts between him and his magazine are as glaring as those between New York City and Aspen, Colorado, where Ross was born 56 years ago.

In appearance a man whose leathery features combine the cowboy look of Will Rogers with the moon-mad expression of Harpo Marx, and whose manners are rough, Ross seems many layers of civilization removed from the elegant, top-hatted Eustace Tilley, whose aloof scrutiny of a butterfly has become the trademark of *New Yorker* urbanity. In actions Ross, who is tireless, cantankerous and probably happy, is equally far removed from the unruffled calm of his magazine, and over the years his uninhibited

doings have practically assumed the proportions of a Manhattan legend.

According to legend, Ross, a garrulous man, spends most of his day uttering a lament on his troubles. In moments of greatest anguish he lifts his eyes to heaven and yells, "God, how I pity me!" Asked how he feels, his standard reply is a thundering "Terrible." "If Ross ever answered *'fine,'*" Dorothy Parker cracked once, "I'd know the *New Yorker* was finished." Ross particularly enjoys complaining about being needlessly consulted on petty office matters. One day as he discoursed on this theme before a new employee, an office boy burst in. "I hate to bother you, Mr. Ross," the boy panted, "but what shall I do? A gentleman is trying to commit suicide in the men's room." Ross cast a triumphant look at the new employee. "See what I mean?" he asked.

In the company of men no sentence Ross speaks is without its chunk of unadorned, top-sergeant profanity. Asked if he had been a happy man, he answered, "It's been a son of a bitch of a life, I guess." Bidding farewell to a writer, he threw an affectionate arm around the departing one. "God bless

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you, McNulty, God damn it," he said. In the presence of women Ross heroically confines his swearing to the word Buckwheat, a term of scorn. Moreover, he has labored to stem profanity among others in the *New Yorker* office. "If you put swear words in memos to me," he warned males on the staff, "put the memos in envelopes and seal. There are women around."

On occasions when Ross undertakes to be charming the results are usually strange. Once James Thurber introduced him to his eye doctor. "I have no use for professional men," Ross stated loudly. Then he began a happy cross-examination of the doctor. At the end of the evening he declared himself an authority on the human eye. Inviting a writer to lunch to offer him a job, Ross announced, "I'm late, God damn it," when they met. Learning the writer was from the South he expounded for two hours on patent medicines and Coca-Cola. Stopping abruptly he demanded, "Want to work up here?" After the writer joined the staff, Ross did not speak to him for three years. Now when the two meet, they talk about eels.

## II

How Ross, the rough Colorado diamond, has been able to produce the *New Yorker*, a magazine unerring in its excellent taste, is a major mystery. He has, for one thing, displayed a steady lack of interest in popular taste. Where other editors devote

themselves to studying reader-interest charts, Ross maintains, "An editor prints only what pleases him — if enough people like what he likes, he is a success." There can be no doubt that Ross, whose magazine is now worth \$5 million, has been a success, though a maddening and inexplicable one. "Without question he is the most brilliant magazine editor of our time," Bennett Cerf (whose wedding Ross attended carrying an antique shotgun) once wrote. "No man," says Russell Maloney, who spent eleven years working for Ross, "has been the subject of so much analysis, interpretation and explanation — with so little result." His staff, when asked to explain him, falls back on the simple statement that Ross is a genius; but the answer may be that Ross, who teems with notions and prejudices, knows best what he does not like and, being a genius, what he does like is exactly right.

Ross himself, who once said to Robert Benchley, "I don't want you to think I'm not incoherent," is seldom coherent about what guides him as an editor. Only about morals in his magazine does he appear to have a definite standard. "I don't know," he will mutter over a realistic piece, "some pregnant woman might read it and have a miscarriage." Office legend has it that such a woman once wrote him about being shocked by a story in the *New Yorker*, with such results. This frightened Ross for life, though if the lady suffered it was probably from laughter rather than realism.

Over the years an aggressive prudishness, coupled with instinctive good taste, has kept questionable material from Ross' tightly-edited magazine. One of James Thurber's first jobs on the staff was to search for innuendo the copy of such worldly writers as Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley. Knowing Ross' prudishness they delighted in devising subtle *double entendres*.

Personally editing everything that goes into the *New Yorker*, Ross, who does not look his age and has about him the quality of a grown-up Tom Sawyer, reads all material in galley form. He hauls his typewriter to him, leans over it and begins to read the galley, concentrating so intensely that his tongue hangs from his mouth like that of an overworked horse. Tearing into each sentence before him for accuracy, complete information and straightforward style, he is driven by a passion for perfection, a furious determination to make each issue better than the one before. In this he is assisted by an ignorance fantastic in a grown man—an ignorance which enables him to approach material as an editor ideally should, without prejudice or previous information. No one knows when Ross left school. He himself is vague on the subject, admitting only that he was a part-time newspaper reporter at thirteen and full-time shortly after. Quitting school so young, Ross had little time to learn. After he had proceeded to immerse himself completely in day-to-day newspaper work, he never found

time to make himself an educated man. Behind his ignorance, however, lies a vast though oddly negative curiosity. Only when a galley is placed before him does he burn to know every detail of the subject it covers. Often Ross' queries, which he types and numbers to correspond with numbers he puts on the galley, run longer than the original piece. Once he spent a happily profane afternoon exposing the inadequacies of a Reporter-at-Large article, only to discover it was the second half of two parts.

In his ceaseless quest for perfection in print, the curious editor of the *New Yorker* has focused his fierce attention on a multitude of subjects, and considers himself an expert on most. Particularly he claims the status of expert on eels, the Sargasso Sea, eunuchs, railroads and finance. After discovering Wells' *Outline of History*, and being delighted and amazed by its contents, he became an authority on world history. Nothing delights Ross more than to learn something he never suspected. Discovering that birds are descended from reptiles, he spent days buttonholing members of his staff. "Jeez Christ," he demanded happily, "do you know a bird is a snake?"

*New Yorker* writers insist that their magazine has no definite style, though there is a widespread belief that they are trained to write a certain way. Rather, they say, it is the checking, re-writing and re-checking, spearheaded by Ross and followed by every editor down the line—the

constant, meticulous insistence on perfection — that creates the *New Yorker* style. So many new facts are added, so many sentences clarified and rearranged that *New Yorker* writing becomes as easy to read as strained baby food is to eat.

Ross, who was among the first to use one-line captions and to link cartoons with contemporary events, goes through the same inspired fussing over the cartoons and covers, which are perhaps more famous than *New Yorker* prose. His memory for art is phenomenal. At one drawing, re-submitted after nearly a year, he barked, "He's darkened the sky." "No, he hasn't," the art editor assured him. "Find out," Ross ordered. The sky had been darkened. Ross' determination on excellence inevitably carries over to captions. Seldom is the artist's own caption used; often the caption is first perfected in the office, then farmed out to an artist. But no matter how short, captions are re-written numberless times. To date the office record is held by a Peter Arno caption, which passed through every typewriter in the office and was three years in the perfecting.

### III

Ross was born on November 6, 1892, the son of a militant anti-Mormon who, when Harold was seven, moved his family from Colorado to Salt Lake City, in order to be nearer the fray. Another anti-Mormon, of the period was the publisher of the Salt

Lake City *Tribune*. This man shortly became a friend of Ross' father, and Ross started part-time work in the city room of the *Tribune* while still in grammar school, becoming a full-time reporter a little later. Soon the *Tribune* began to confine the juvenile journalist and, still under eighteen, he set out for California, beginning a career as journeyman reporter which took him to newspapers up and down the West Coast, to Atlanta, Washington, and finally, during the first world war, to editorship of the Army paper, *Stars and Stripes*.

Exactly when the idea of the *New Yorker* first exploded in Ross' teeming brain is not known. Today he says he developed ideas for six different magazines in the years between 1919 and the start of the *New Yorker*. He was an editor of the humor magazine, *Judge*, when one day early in 1924 he invited Raoul Fleischmann, of the baking family, to lunch. Addicted to poker and masculine companionship, the pair had met at the celebrated Thanatopsis Literary and Inside Straight Club, whose members included such New York literary wits as Alexander Woollcott, Franklin P. Adams and George S. Kaufman. An urbane and ingratiating man, Fleischmann was one of the few millionaires allowed in the Thanatopsis. At their luncheon, Ross informed Fleischmann that he wanted to start his own magazine and needed financial backing. A veteran of seventeen years in the baking business, Fleischmann was looking for a more colorful career, and

showed interest until Ross began outlining one of his six ideas. Fleischmann did not like it and, after a moment of confusion, Ross spoke about a smart local magazine which would have the light, sophisticated approach to life of the *Thanatopsis* wits. Fleischmann liked this idea better. At later luncheons he agreed to put up \$150,000 and become the publisher, which he is today. The name *New Yorker* was supplied by the late John Peter Toohey, a Broadway press agent.

Ballyhooed by posters of Eustace Tilley, the Rea Irvin dandy who has decorated every anniversary issue since, the magazine first appeared on New York newsstands on February 21, 1925. Through its first spring and summer the magazine did badly. Its circulation dwindled so alarmingly that Fleischmann considered withdrawing his investment, and called a luncheon at the Princeton Club for the purpose of doing this. He, Eugene Spaulding, the business manager, Ross, and John Hanrahan, a publishers' counsellor, sat down to a gloomy meal. Only Hanrahan, whose connection with the magazine had been slight, radiated hope. He was a brisk, voluble Irishman who talked in a husky whisper and who used words in such peculiar combinations that his associates collected Hanrahan phrases, as Hollywood wags collect the utterances of Sam Goldwyn. In picturing a bright future, Hanrahan's talk rose to intoxicating heights, and it is possible that listening to his dizzying verbiage

weakened Fleischmann. At any rate, as the four parted after luncheon Fleischmann made up his mind to stay with the *New Yorker*.

By January 1926 the magazine was catching on and Ross, who for the first months had practically worked alone, in the offices at 25 West 45th Street, began accumulating a staff. For an editor with his high standards, this was comparable to assembling a symphony orchestra, yet Ross operated solely on the theory that by hiring enough people he would eventually find the perfect ones. Quickly the *New Yorker* became populated with men he liked as drinking companions, others who merely drifted in the door, and strays from all quarters of the literary world. Among the writers Ross hired was one who developed the shakes if he touched paper: an office boy had to stand at his side, feeding the paper into his typewriter. One female writer usually behaved normally except that at intervals each day she carefully removed her rings, wristwatch and other jewelry. Leaving these on her desk, she walked to another office where she telephoned her husband, to whom she delivered an unmerciful tongue-lashing. Then, returning to her desk, she put on her jewelry and again applied herself to work.

Fanatically determined that each issue of his magazine be perfect, Ross demanded endless re-writes, queried all facts and howled endlessly for improvement. This drove his frantic and constantly shifting staff to sani-

tariums, to fits on the floor and to threatening him with violence. Ross further added to the general discomfort by a magnificent impatience with office design. Seeking to achieve the perfect office, as well as the perfect magazine and staff, he ordered walls smashed, built up, and smashed again, while partitions and furniture were switched almost daily. Returning from lunch to find a pneumatic drill busy outside his office, James Thurber, Ross' most celebrated writer and cartoonist, gathered all the available metal wastebaskets and bowled them down the hall in noisy protest. Finally the drill retired, leaving Thurber free to write. At another time the confusion became so complete that Thurber posted a sign, *Alterations Going On as Usual During Business*.

Ross' fond dream during this period was to sit at a central desk with push-buttons and supervise each issue by remote control, like a general directing a campaign. Temperamentally unsuited to organizing such a utopian system, he hoped for a managing editor who would. With colossal naïveté he believed that most of the men he hired for his editorial department were just the ones he wanted for this position. These men — who were referred to as the Jesuses to Ross' God — would be told, immediately on being hired, to start organizing the office. Wandering off, they quickly discovered that Ross ran everything himself and that no one, Jesus or otherwise, had been

able to get the slightest organizing authority away from him. Some time later the Jesus would pass Ross in the hall. Ross would not speak — he had either forgotten the new man or had hired another managing editor. After that the Jesus would sit collecting his pay until Ross summoned the nerve to fire him, which sometimes took years.

## IV

While driving his staff Ross also drove himself. Considering the *New Yorker* a 24-hour job, he seldom thought or talked of anything else. The image of Ross concentrating on his magazine became so impressed on his staff that, learning the man was to become the father of a child, one editor murmured, "Conceived in an absent-minded moment, no doubt."

At this time Ross, in manner and appearance, was the roughest of rough diamonds, a sloppy dresser who permitted his hair to grow straight up from his scalp so that he would not have to use a comb. "He is essentially a desert rat," wrote a friend at the time, "unequal to the amenities that well-mannered people, even well-mannered plumbers, consider necessary to living." Ross could not, for example, summon up the geniality required to say Good Morning to anyone on arriving at the office. Office boys at the *New Yorker* were instructed never to speak to Mr. Ross. The men working for him admired his ability and integrity to such an extent that they were willing to

overlook anything, while outside friends often found his lack of manners appealing. "Ross is the only man I know," said Charles MacArthur, "who has charm in his roughness."

"It has always amazed me," said another friend once, "that the most naïve of men can edit the most sophisticated of magazines." Ross early went on record as objecting to women in offices, believing that association between the sexes inevitably led to trouble. Often he announced at the top of his voice, "I will keep sex out of this office if it's the last thing I do." After the inter-office marriages of Katherine Angell and E. B. White, and Lois Long and Peter Arno, Ross was forced to abandon these efforts, confining himself to announcing on occasion, "Sex is an incident."

From the very first days of his magazine, Ross has insisted that no representative of the advertising or business departments ever set foot in the editorial office. Unlike others which began with this noble resolve, the *New Yorker* has hewed to it. In the days when the magazine occupied a single floor Ross ordered a partition erected between editorial and business departments. Members of those departments, who were not without humor, christened this partition the Chastity Belt, but there is no record of anyone violating it. When a member of the advertising department won the Irish sweepstakes, the halls of the business office rang with celebration, while reporters and photographers tore in to interview the lucky

girl. Despite the sounds from across the partition, however, no member of the editorial department joined, or even investigated, the fun. Even Raoul Fleischmann, the publisher, is subject to Ross' iron non-fraternization decree. Encountering him in the editorial office, one writer was taken aback. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "I have permission to come," Fleischmann answered humbly.

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"I have been laid up with duodenal ulcers, half the staff has gone to war, and I'm sorely pressed," Ross wrote to a friend in 1944. The war as well as his ulcers has had a sobering, even a mellowing, effect on the rambunctious Ross. Always believing that, with the exception of men like Thurber, White and Wolcott Gibbs, he could easily staff his magazine, Ross was suddenly faced with a frightening shortage of editors and writers. This caused him to appreciate those he had, and the selfless way they served him through the war brought more appreciation. Today Ross, always the man of extremes, values his staff mightily and speaks to everyone, including office boys, in the halls.

Ross' ulcers have forced him to tame his actions, but he remains a highly active man, proud that 24 intense, dedicated years have kept him young. They have also kept him refreshingly folksy and unspoiled. Some years ago he heard that Henry Luce, the prim publisher of *Life*, *Time* and *Fortune*, objected to a



Profile of himself which was to be published in the *New Yorker*. Ross decided to call Luce. When his secretary said, "Mr. Luce is on the phone," Ross casually lit a cigarette, sauntered over to the phone and said, "Hi, Luce." The two men decided to get together to discuss the Profile. "There isn't a single nice thing about me in the whole piece," Luce sputtered when they met. "That," said Ross, "is what you get for trying to be a baby tycoon."

Actual issues of the *New Yorker* have changed even less than Ross. While most other publications have been re-designed his remains the same size, with practically the same departments, and even the same type. (The type was designed by Rea Irvin, the magazine's first art director and called Irvin type.) An unabashed luxury magazine, the *New Yorker* by fast editorial footwork has survived a depression and a world conflict — in the latter case surprising everyone by producing superb war reporting.

Today the magazine is more serious than ever before; indeed, in a supposedly humorous magazine, the cartoons are the only feature which consistently strive to be funny. Within the last two years the magazine has run important stories on the bombing of Hiroshima (by John Hersey) and the Greenville lynching (by Rebecca West). Like most fruits of Ross' editorial judgment, these two articles were highly successful and easily justified the more serious turn the magazine has taken.

Still a relentless perfectionist in the office, Ross even now makes efforts toward supreme office efficiency. As part of his new policy of catering to the staff, he recently decided a lounge would make his writers more contented. By shifting partitions and reducing office space, a lounge was created. The lounge was windowless; it derived light from the halls through heavy glass which gave it an air of elegance different from other offices on the floor. This much accomplished, Ross found another interest and no one bothered to provide furniture for the room. Last year, when a smallpox scare swept New York, the lounge was used by the doctor who vaccinated the staff.

Ross still appears to labor 24 hours a day, working at home in the morning — either in his apartment on Park Avenue or at his country home in Stamford, Connecticut — then going to the office after lunch at the Algonquin to work until anywhere from 6 P.M. to midnight. His closest friends outside the office are a private detective, a wholesale grocery dealer and a photographer. For his vacation trips he usually meets Dave Chasen, the comedian turned Hollywood restaurateur. With Ray Schindler, his detective friend, Ross has played innumerable practical jokes over the years. Once he stole a small metal sign from a bookstore which said, "This property is under the protection of the Schindler Detective Agency." After seeing this in Ross' office, Schindler repaired to the Hotel



New Yorker, where he lifted a bath-mat which said "The New Yorker." When Ross in turn had seen this in Schindler's bathroom he got some New Yorker Hotel stationery and wrote a letter demanding the mat, signing the letter "House Detective." There this gag seems to have died, but as a result of his practical jokes Ross' office for years was a museum of oddities which has boasted such collectors' items as the opera hat Rudolph Valentino wore on the night of his fatal collapse. Another collector around town had secured this choice item and enshrined it in a glass case. Seeing it there, the redoubtable Charles MacArthur smashed the case with his fist and ran with the trophy to the *New Yorker* office. There, with fitting ceremonies, he presented the hat to Ross.

One of the most fascinating games in literary Manhattan is speculation

about what will happen to the *New Yorker* when Ross no longer edits it. More than any other magazine editor, it is pointed out, Ross *is* his magazine. It is possible to discuss either Ross or the magazine, while covering the same subjects, making the same points, and arriving at the same conclusions. Many observers believe that William Shawn, Ross' number-one managing editor who though unlike Ross personally reflects him as an editor, will be the successor who will continue the course of the magazine. Others predict its speedy collapse after Ross leaves.

Ross himself is aware of this speculation and will have none of it. A man who seldom looks beyond next week's issue of his magazine, he has settled for himself the question of what will happen to the *New Yorker* when he retires or dies. "It will go its God-damn way, I guess," he says.

#### PHRASE ORIGINS—34

TO CALL THE TURN: When Mr. Edwin Pauley assured a congressional investigating committee that anyone experienced in the commodity market could have called the turn on the postwar upswing, he probably did not realize that he was salting his vocabulary with the argot of the *faro-bank*, once the most popular as well as the most corrupt of American gambling games. In *faro*, the dealer draws the cards from a dealer's box in pairs, each pair being known as a turn, harking back to the old days before dealing boxes when dealers "turned" the cards over from a pack held in the hand. The players bet by stacking chips on a layout consisting of thirteen cards pasted face up on a table; they attempt to predict the order in which cards will be drawn from the box or, in the argot of the bank, to call the turn. Since both dealers and players often were — and are — adept cheaters, calling the turn usually involved more chicanery than luck. Today the phrase as used in the popular sense means to predict an event with accuracy and cunning.

DAVID MAURER AND EVERETT DEBAUN