

Scoundrel Time: Diary of a Schoolgirl

"I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions"—proud and worthy words orated in the cruel spring of 1952 as mobs of American Legionnaires swept down the boulevards of America and the virtuous remnant shivered behind drawn curtains, schooling themselves in the legal arcanum of the Fifth Amendment: "I refuse to answer on the grounds, I refuse to answer on the grounds...." The fever of McCarthyism was upon the Great Republic: the Bill of Rights had been adjourned, the Supreme Court was in hiding, every cultural fount in the Republic was being patrolled by fanatical yahoos and—worse still—out-and-out anti-Communists. Why Miss Lillian Hellman, the ageless coed who intoned the above declaration of principle, was not immediately arrested and garroted at the feet of the Statue of Liberty is a mystery. How the Republic survived into 1976 is a greater mystery still. Yet Miss Hellman is here with us today, free to relate this tale of villainy, fain to admit her dominant role in saving us from the totalitarian night, and glad to fill her purse with loot so suavely exacted from that vast body of untutorable gulls who today queue up for every sequel of anti-American soap opera provided by Hollywood and the publishing industry.

Billed as a memoir, *Scoundrel Time* is, in its vitals, the balmy diary of a spoony school girl. Were we the denizens of any other era, one might imagine that Lillian's mischievous brother had plucked the torrid manuscript from its hiding place beneath a tangle of teen-form bras and secreted it off to a publisher of fourth-rate melodrama. But these are great days. The intellectuals yearn for tales of 100% American infamy, and the ancient laws of supply and demand are responding admirably. Hence, for a pittance, readers can now gasp with Lillian Hellman, the sempiternal college girl lost in trivial and incoherent fantasies, self-pitying, self-deluding, and mortifying. Lillian is flaming youth, an ingenue ill-used by this too, too cruel world and often ambushed by the uncontrollable thumpings of her very big heart. Great fame

exacts its toll. Genius is abused and betrayed. Life is hard. Nonetheless the kid bounces back, for she is a trooper, an intellect of note, a good and indomitable spirit. How she has suffered! How any literate person who has to read this book will suffer! Lillian Hellman is to our era what Patty Hearst might become. Whether

force even though she has an Outer Mongolian's ear for English prose and no belief in historical accuracy whatsoever; for Lillian is no champion of the Chamber of Commerce, much the contrary. She is an artiste, and life-long critic of George Babbitt and all his bourgeois kin. Still, she loved that \$140,000-a-year income, and I am personally relieved to see that the capitalists have held no grudges. According to the redoubtable *Publishers Weekly* she now maintains handsome quarters overlooking Park Avenue and a house on Martha's Vineyard—all the better to continue her researches into the evils of America's privileged classes. What is more, the Blackglama fur company has given her a \$7,000 mink coat for modeling it in the *New Yorker*—another example of capitalism's brazen exploitations perhaps, but a swell mink coat nonetheless.

Born of wealthy and somewhat moldy New Orleans parents, Lillian allowed Mr. and Mrs. Hellman to escape what must have been a life of hell when she took her marvellous mind and all of its complaints off to New York, there to study at New York University, drop in on all the high-brow salons, and pick up the visionary notions of the young Trotskyites without every having to read Trotsky or accept an ice pick to the cerebrum. In the 1930s she became a playwright of third-rate stuff and a rising Hollywood dramatist. But always she returned to Dashiell Hammett, a modern Dickens whose compassion for the brotherhood of man compelled him to side with Marshal Joseph Stalin, the late Soviet humanitarian. Dash and his friends never broke with the enlightened Russian leader. They stuck with him through the Moscow trials, the purges, the Hitler pact, the whole program of reform and Soviet progress. If Lillian did not approve such raffish associations it is one of the few complaints she has ever kept to herself. In fact to this day she remains somewhat coy about Old Joe, referring to his torture chambers, his

THE
HAROLD ROBBINS AWARD

Scoundrel Time
by Lillian Hellman

HONORABLE MENTION

Born on the Fourth of July
by Ron Kovic

Lovers and Tyrants
by Francine du Plessix Gray

Patty ever has her diary published is a question of moment to the entire literary world, but for now we have to satisfy ourselves with the adventures of Lillian.

As with all diaries *Scoundrel Time* is elliptical, a concatenation of events and insights of quality varying from the pedestrian to the moronic. Yet the thing is sustained by the almost voluptuous fascination of Lillian's incessant belly-aching about how a conspiracy of right-wing pols and left-wing intellectuals denied her a \$140,000-a-year honorarium for creating Hollywood masterpieces. Such a complaint issuing from Lillian has great dramatic

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Stephen Miller

The Legend of Scoundrel Time

How does a government preserve itself while at the same time preserving civil liberties? The question does not lend itself to such easy answers as Lillian Hellman provides.

We often make sense of the past by singling out those figures who point towards the present, especially those luminaries who were out of key with their times—misunderstood by their contemporaries. Doing history in this way may at times be appropriate but it smacks of condescension, as if the age were too dim-witted for the likes of us, only worthwhile insofar as it tossed up such suffering prophets. Doing history in this way also means ransacking the past for notions that support our current moral, intellectual, or artistic assumptions—using the past to give credit to our supposedly enlightened present.

Such an historical game has recently been played by Lillian Hellman, the well-known dramatist and the author of several highly-acclaimed autobiographies. In her book, *Scoundrel Time*, she speaks of the dark ages of the late forties and early fifties, when a small band of worthies, including herself, were punished for their enlightened views of the Cold War. According to Hellman, those decent persons, "who wanted to make a better world," were victims of one of those "fierce, sweeping, violent nonsense-tragedies that break out in America from time to time...." Having escaped from such a horrendous past, Hellman feels obliged to tell the story of what it was like then—the trials and tribulations one endured for having "advanced" views.

For Hellman that dark age is easy to fathom. On one side are Communists, fellow travellers, and anti-anti-Communists: good people all, who did not "mean any harm," and who, above all, were intent on blaming the United States for the Cold War. On the other side are all the unscrupulous and power-hungry politicians who were responsible for the numerous Congressional investigations that hounded and persecuted supposed "subversives" like herself. On this side were also those cowardly and dishonorable persons who either cooperated with the committees, telling all, or refused to come to the aid of those being persecuted. Hellman is especially contemptuous of liberal anti-Communists who, she claims, were inconsistent on the question of civil liberties as well as wrong in their view of the world. It is these people, she says, who ultimately were responsible for "the Vietnam War and the days of Nixon."

Though Hellman's reading of the period has been vigorously disputed by several writers, including Nathan Glazer, a "neo-conservative," as well as Irving Howe, a socialist, her view of the period has quickly become *the* view for many people, so that in a review of *The Front*, a recent movie about the blacklist, the critic speaks of the "insane excesses" of that era, and of "the wave of

paranoid hysteria that resulted in a tragic tally of wrecked careers and ruined lives." Though few people would claim, as a somewhat emotional historian recently did in the *New York Times*, that in those days the United States succeeded in "replicating Stalinism to protect us from Stalin," many people—especially young people—would say that in those days the United States was well on its way to becoming a fascist nation.

It is easy, no doubt, to think the worst of that period, for the two names most closely associated with the persecution of Communists are Richard Nixon and Joe McCarthy, both of whom—in obviously different ways—turned out to be scoundrels. And it is also easy to think the best of Lillian Hellman, whose frank autobiographies, in which she presents herself as a woman of courage, personal loyalty, and old-fashioned decency, have all become best-sellers, making her into a hero of the women's movement. Moreover the age also favors Hellman's views, for in the mid-seventies we are by now rather blasé and bored about Communism—quick to point out that it is not a monolithic force and that it does, in fact, come in different flavors, from the humane Italian to the oppressive Russian.

Thus one can see why Hellman has become a prophet who is finally being recognized and honored—recognized as an early advocate of detente and honored as a tough, "liberated" woman who refused to be cowed by the threats of an investigative committee. Her moral authority is such that for many people she must obviously be right when she denies that the Communists and fellow travellers posed any threat to American freedom. Who, she indignantly asks, were the true subversives—those well-meaning souls who demonstrated for world peace or those demagogic politicians who ranted about an internal Communist conspiracy? For her and many others the answer to that question is obvious: only scoundrels could have made such a fuss about Communists in America.

It is all well and good to condemn demagogic politicians, but it does not follow that we must accept Hellman's notion of a benign Communist Party. In the late forties the Communist Party was at the height of its influence and power in the United States—a party whose chief tenet was "unswerving loyalty to the Soviet Union and its immediate national interests," a party that was "a force to be reckoned with and to be respected," particularly in liberal and labor circles.

The above quotations are not gleanings from the radical Right. They come from *Ambiguous Legacy: The Left in American Politics*, which is the work of a contemporary socialist of the New Left variety, James Weinstein. Even Hellman herself admits that the Communist Party well-nigh controlled Henry Wallace's campaign for President on the Progressive ticket in 1948. Making

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