

# Henry Hazlitt: Journalist of the Century

by Llewellyn H. Rockwell, Jr.

**H**enry Stuart Hazlitt wrote brilliantly and presciently for more than eight decades on culture, government, economics, and political affairs. He warned against deconstructionism, against Freudianism, and against the attack on reason. He censured the income tax, central banking, the New Deal, Keynesianism, socialism, war socialism, price controls, unionism, the welfare state, and deficits.

Like one of the great Romans he admired, he had more than knowledge and talent. He had a vigorous will, strong moral conviction, and supreme courage. He was never discouraged, and never slackened in the fight.

His lifetime bibliography—recently compiled by Jeff Tucker\*—includes a novel, a trialogue on literary criticism, two large treatises on economics and moral philosophy, several edited volumes, some sixteen other books, and countless chapters, articles, commentaries, reviews—more than 6,000 entries in all—and even so, this figure cannot include everything, because so many

of his earliest works were unsigned and uncollected. Hazlitt himself once estimated that he had written 10 million words, and that his collected works would run to 150 volumes.

Yet he lost every prominent job he ever held—literary editor at *The Nation*, top editorialist at the *New York Times*, weekly columnist at *Newsweek*—because he refused to bend or compromise.

Family circumstances prevented him from getting a complete formal education, so he read all the classics of ancient and modern literature on his own initiative, while working in jobs that offered very low pay.

Harry Hazlitt was born on this day, one hundred years ago, in Philadelphia. His father died when Henry was a baby, and when he was six, his mother enrolled him in Girard College, a home for “fatherless white boys” set up by a local philanthropist. His mother remarried and they moved to Brooklyn when Henry was nine, where he attended public schools. His earliest ambition was to become a psychologist “like William James,” but his family’s financial situation forced him to give up that idea. After a year and a half at City College, he had to look for a way to earn money.

Late in life, he told the story of his job search to an interviewer, not passing up the opportunity to explain something about labor economics:

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\**Henry Hazlitt: A Giant of Liberty* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1994), 158 pages.

I had no skills whatever. So I would get a job, and I would last two or three days and be fired. It never surprised me or upset me, because I read the *Times* early in the morning, went through the ads, and I'd practically have a job that day. This shows what happens when you have a free market. There was no such thing as a minimum wage. . . . There was no such thing as relief, except maybe . . . a soup handout. . . . [T]here was no systematic welfare. You had a free market. And so I usually found myself at a job the next day, and I'd get fired about three or four days after that. . . . I didn't have the skills. But each time I kept learning something, and finally I was getting about \$3 or \$4 a week.

This was at the same time that he was systematically reading the ancient and modern classics. "At some point I decided that I wanted to be a newspaperman," he explained, "because it was the only way I could see to get into writing." At the age of 20, when he finally got a job at the *Wall Street Journal* as a stenographer, he had already finished his first book, *Thinking as a Science*, which was published in 1915.

His first book, like everything he ever wrote, made a strong argument and made it well. "I don't think it's worthwhile," he told an interviewer late in life, "if you haven't made up your mind, to write a piece saying, 'Well, on one hand, but on the other hand.'"

## The "Essential Qualities"

Whatever Hazlitt wrote, it was always in clear and virile English. He adhered to the rule he set out for himself: "aim first at the essential qualities—coherence, clarity, precision, simplicity, and brevity. Euphony and rhythm are of course also desirable, but they are like the final rubbing on a fine piece of furniture—finishing touches justified only if the piece has been soundly made."

In 1916, he left the *Wall Street Journal* to write editorials for the *New York Evening Post*, then wrote the monthly newsletter of the Mechanics and Metals National Bank, and later worked for the *New York Evening Mail*. While at the *Mail* in 1922, his second

book appeared. *The Way to Will Power* was a defense of individual initiative against the deterministic claims of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Hazlitt's reputation as a writer and thinker had grown, thanks also to his reviews and essays on authors as diverse as Garet Garrett, Spinoza, Santayana, Mencken, and Bertrand Russell. A 1927 essay entitled "Bertrand Russell's Universe" attracted the attention of the British author, who, at the time, was widely considered (probably incorrectly) to be the most brilliant man alive.

Russell so admired the young journalist's talent that he and his publisher asked Hazlitt to write the philosopher's official biography. Hazlitt spent much of 1928 and 1929 interviewing Russell in New York. One day, however, Russell announced: "You know, I have had a very interesting life. I think I'd like to do my own autobiography."

## At *The Nation*

In the meantime, the editors of *The Nation* had noticed Hazlitt's work and hired him as literary editor. "*The Nation* was pretty much a leftist magazine then, as it has always remained," he explained to an interviewer. "One of the reasons they took me on was that they wanted me not only to write and handle the book reviews but to be able to write editorials on economic subjects." And his work there was extraordinary. He wrote on contemporary literature as a springboard to his own rich observations on philosophy, culture, history, economics, and politics.

He condemned modern education for forgetting the classics and laughed at Marxian attempts to read polylogism into the great works of the ancients. No matter how shoddy the rest of the magazine, Hazlitt's prose shone through: always provocative, always tightly written, and always worth reading. While there, he penned an early refutation of literary deconstructionism, *The Anatomy of Criticism*. It is still a fascinating work on standards in literature.

But he never lost his interest in econom-

ics. And from time to time, the editors allowed him space in the economic and political section of the magazine. One of his first articles in the area appeared in 1931. It was called "Rubber Money and Iron Debts," a phrase which pretty much sums up the era. He carried with him a passion for sound money the rest of his life.

If you want to read a magnificent attack on the New Deal abandonment of the gold standard, look at "Shall We Devalue the Dollar? Parts 1 and 2," which appeared in March 1932 in *The Nation*. Or take a look at his classic attack on socialist George Soule, which appeared two months later. Even better, take a look at his defense of hoarding at the height of anti-hoarding hysteria in March 1933.

Hazlitt was not trained as an economist, although few scholars were as familiar with the relevant literature. He was inspired initially by the writings of Philip Wicksteed, a disciple of early Marginalist William Stanley Jevons, and later by the works of Herbert Spencer.

Over the course of his life, Hazlitt became more and more opposed to government intervention in the economy, and time and again he refused to give in to pressure from publishers and editors to change his views.

The first time he was squeezed out of a prestigious job was in mid-1933, when he squared off with Louis Fischer on the cause of the Depression. Fischer took the position that events confirmed the Marxian theory of economic crisis under capitalism. Hazlitt, though unfamiliar with the totality of the Austrian theory of the business cycle, argued that the Depression was caused by loose credit and subsequent interventions in the labor market.

It was a rigorous and free-wheeling debate. But the other editors must have realized how important it was to the future of government policy and the fate of progressivism itself. So at the end of Hazlitt's last piece, they wrote the following: "The discussion in the foregoing articles of the causes of the present economic debacle and possible ways out will be commented upon editorially in a forthcoming issue." Need-

less to say, *The Nation's* editors sided with the socialists. Hazlitt, suddenly condemned as a reactionary, was out. His adherence to principle had led to his ouster.

In the early thirties, the literary set also turned against H.L. Mencken, founding editor of the *American Mercury*, because of his opposition to the New Deal. When Mencken decided to turn the journal over to a new editor, he named Hazlitt, calling him the "only competent critic of the arts that I have heard of who was at the same time a competent economist, of practical as well as theoretical training." And, Mencken added, "he is one of the few economists in human history who could really write." True to his indefatigable spirit, Hazlitt's first article, "The Fallacies of the N.R.A.," was an implicit attack on the entire American Left, including *The Nation*.

## The Times Years

Hazlitt was only the editor for a short while, before he decided to go back into newspaper work. In those days, even the *New York Times* was not as left wing as it is today, and the paper hired Hazlitt to write editorials and review essays, which he did from 1934 to 1946.

Appearing almost daily, his editorials covered an extraordinarily wide range: the dangers of economic controls, the evils of abandoning the gold standard, the stupidity of Blue Eagle planning, the idiocy of protectionism, the evils of wartime price controls, the fraud of Social Security (he was its original prophet of doom), the glories of G.K. Chesterton, the fallacies of Keynesian economics, the futility of foreign aid, the importance of a free market in securities, the hazards of an inflationary monetary policy, the ill-effects of unionization, and much more.

During this time, he met the emigré economist Ludwig von Mises, whose work Hazlitt had admired. Hazlitt and Mises became fast friends, and Mises thrilled to Hazlitt's editorial blasts against government planning, and often consulted Hazlitt on editorial matters and contemporary politics. It is said that Hazlitt even prepared, at Mises'

request, a version of *Human Action* as a journalist would have written it. Mises thanked him, but rejected most of the changes.

While at the *Times*, Hazlitt did whatever he could to hold back the tide of statism. He maintained for 12 years a rapid-fire daily assault against the central state. Whether warning against devaluation or economic embargoes against Japan, which helped lead to Pearl Harbor, he emerges as a true prophet.

Scholars who look back at this period through the eyes of the *New York Times* editorial page might expect to find 100 percent support for Franklin D. Roosevelt. But they are shocked. For Hazlitt—against almost all elite opinion—was at work against FDR. When the American Left discovered this, they arranged for his departure.

But while there, he did a fantastic amount of good. We know FDR received daily reports on *New York Times* opinion. So did his so-called “brain trust.” How much did Hazlitt hold them back? How much worse would the New Deal have been? The same could be asked after the war. Whatever steps were taken away from price controls and unionization could be due in part to his influence.

In 1938, before he had met Mises, Hazlitt wrote a review of Mises’ *Socialism*, calling it the most devastating analysis of the system ever written. He became so enthralled with the economic calculation debate that later in the same year he negatively reviewed various responses to Mises, including Polish socialist Oskar Lange’s. It could be said that it was Hazlitt who fully introduced Mises to American audiences. Later he followed up with reviews of *Human Action*, *Bureaucracy*, and many others. And six years after he first reviewed *Socialism*, he reviewed Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom*, and gently criticized Hayek’s concessions to the social democracy that Hazlitt had spent his life fighting.

His studies on the calculation debate became a novel nearly 15 years later, titled *The Great Idea*, and later, *Time Will Run Back*. And talk about prescience! It concerned how to transform a socialist system

into a free market—at a time when most people thought socialism was the unstoppable wave of the future.

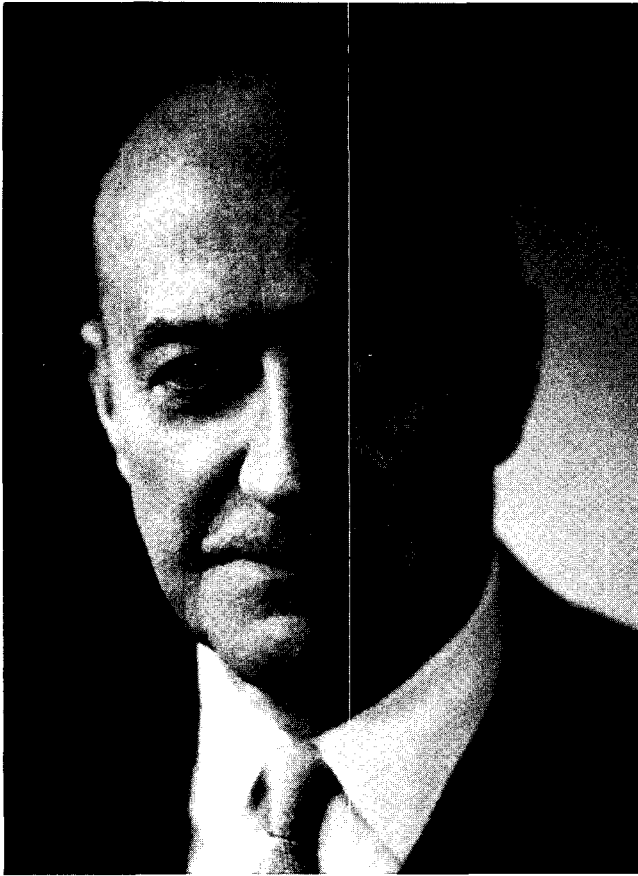
Hazlitt enjoyed his years at the *Times*, yet as with his previous positions, he eventually came under pressure from the publisher to compromise himself. Hazlitt had taken on Keynes’ plans to reconstruct the monetary system after the war, and predicted worldwide inflation in the decades ahead. The *Times*, however, was moving to the Left, and so wanted to endorse the Bretton Woods agreement, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

“Now, Henry,” *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger said to him, “when 43 governments sign an agreement, I don’t see how *The Times* can any longer combat this.”

“All right,” Hazlitt said, “but in that case I can’t write anything further about Bretton Woods. It is an inflationist scheme that will end badly and I can’t support it.” Hazlitt was not fired immediately, although at one point, management threatened to put a disclaimer under his editorials. Soon after, he was squeezed out, but landed a job with *Newsweek*, and became one of the most influential financial writers in the country. His weekly “BusinessTides” column was enduringly popular. Surveys of the readership invariably showed that many subscribers took the magazine solely to read this column. I was among them.

While at *Newsweek*, his *Economics in One Lesson* appeared. As one of the most influential books on economics ever written, it has sold nearly one million copies and is available in at least ten languages. Hazlitt argued that government intervention focuses on the consequences that are seen, and ignores those that are not. These include wealth not created and even destroyed by regulation, inflation, and taxation. In 1947, he wrote *Will Dollars Save the World?*, a book attacking the Marshall Plan, which he saw as an international welfare scheme. The subsequent history of U.S. foreign aid shows just how right he was.

In 1950, Hazlitt took on additional responsibilities to become editor, along with John Chamberlain, of the fortnightly magazine



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Henry Hazlitt (1894–1993)

*The Freeman*. He continued writing for *The Freeman* after its acquisition by the Foundation for Economic Education in the mid-fifties. Some of his best articles published there were later collected into FEE's *The Wisdom of Henry Hazlitt*.

In 1959, Hazlitt came out with *The Failure of the "New Economics,"* an extraordinary line-by-line refutation of John Maynard Keynes' *General Theory*. And though it was panned by the American academic journals at the time, it enlivened a growing movement favoring free markets over state planning. It continues to be an essential resource. A year later, Hazlitt collected a series of scholarly attacks on Keynes as *The Critics of Keynesian Economics*, also still very useful.

In the mid-sixties, Hazlitt turned his attention to the ethical basis of capitalism. Thus his book *The Foundations of Morality*, which he called his proudest achievement.

Now recall that during this time, he was still writing a weekly column for *Newsweek*, and speaking all over the country, meaning he was already busier than most academics. But after 20 years, another parting occurred in 1966. As Kenneth Auchincloss, managing editor, wrote years later, "At the time he was writing, there were readers—and perhaps even some *Newsweek* editors—who must have considered him old-fashioned, out of touch with the times. But Henry would never have considered trimming his opinions to the patterns of the day."

After he left *Newsweek*, he wrote a popular weekly column for the *Los Angeles Times*, which was syndicated around the country. Then he embarked on some new books.

He wrote *Man vs. the Welfare State*, which demonstrated that welfare promotes what it pretends to discourage. This was 20 years before Charles Murray's *Losing*



*Ground*. Then he wrote *The Conquest of Poverty* showing us how to get out of the welfare mess. In it he refuted such schemes as Milton Friedman's negative income tax, and urged immediate abolition of welfare.

His last complete book was published in 1984, when Hazlitt was 90 years old. It was a collection—the only one then in print—of the best writings of the Stoic philosophers Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.

An unfinished manuscript of what would have been his last book sits in his collection at Syracuse University. It is a skeptical look at animal rights. His last published scholarly article appeared in the first issue of the *Review of Austrian Economics*, the journal co-published by the Ludwig von Mises Institute.

## The Future of Liberty

Thirty years ago tonight, a group of friends gathered in this city on the occasion of Hazlitt's 70th birthday. It was only weeks after Lyndon Baines Johnson had been elected, and these freedom lovers were saddened at the state of the world, but at the same time ready to fight. Ludwig von Mises paid tribute to his "distinguished friend." "In this age at the great struggle in favor of freedom and the social system in which men can live as free men, you are our leader. You have indefatigably fought against the step by step advance of the powers anxious to destroy everything that human civilization has created over a long period of centuries. . . . You are the economic conscience of our country and of our nation." "Every friend of freedom may today, in this post-election month, be rather pessimistic about the future. But let us not forget that there is rising a new generation of defenders of freedom." "If we succeed," Mises said to Hazlitt, "it will be to a great extent your merit, the fruit of the work that you have done in the first 70 years of your life."

Hazlitt then reflected on his life, and in so doing painted a dark picture of the state of human liberty. Yet "none of us is yet on the torture rack; we are not yet in jail; we're getting various harassments and annoy-

ances, but what we mainly risk is merely our popularity, the danger that we will be called nasty names."

"We have a duty to speak even more clearly and courageously, to work hard, and to keep fighting this battle while the strength is still in us. . . . Even those of us who have reached and passed our 70th birthdays cannot afford to rest on our oars and spend the rest of our lives dozing in the Florida sun. The times call for courage. The times call for hard work. But if the demands are high, it is because the stakes are even higher. They are nothing less than the future of human liberty, which means the future of civilization."

The great voice of Henry Hazlitt, "the economic conscience of our country and our nation," is now stilled. But this journalist of the century will not be forgotten. In a time dominated by prevaricators and planners, in a nation still threatened by statism, Hazlitt's written legacy, will continue to inspire writers and scholars.

We need more economists like Henry Hazlitt, who are willing to write in defense of free enterprise, and do so in plain English and to adhere to principle, whether analyzing history, theory, or present policy, regardless of the personal cost.

If we win, as Mises said, we can in part thank Henry Hazlitt. Yet Hazlitt has never gotten his due. And we know why: because he was right—right about the New Deal, right about Keynes, right about the attack on reason, right about the welfare state, right about inflation, and right about the morality of capitalism. Our age cannot tolerate that. The intellectual establishment has too much invested in the present failure to admit who the real prophets of this century are.

Henry Hazlitt, although he made a profound difference in our age, seemed sometimes to be from another time. He had the breadth and *gravitas* of a Cicero, the moral force of a Tacitus, and like his beloved Stoics, lived a life of honor and principle. The ancient republic of Rome would have cherished him. So should we. And if we restore the American republic, his bust should someday stand in our Senate, among those of our greatest men. □

# H. G. Wells in Russia

by Martin Gardner

Today's college students, preoccupied with everything except a liberal education, have only the dimmest awareness of how many famous writers, artists, and thinkers around the world were once under the magic spell of Communism. They have no conception of how many bright, attractive young people in American universities during the 1930s called each other "comrade," exulting in the delusion that they were part of a vast, inevitable Revolution destined to overthrow an evil capitalism.

The Soviet Empire has now crumbled, Communist parties are dissolving, the old tricolor Russian flag has replaced the hammer and sickle, statues of Lenin have been toppled, and Marxist ideology is dead except in the atrophied brains of a few elderly die-hards around the globe. As history takes this unexpected turn, it is good to remember that from the beginning—not just among conservatives but among democratic socialists—there were many who saw clearly that Marxism was a weird mystique set forth by an egotistical crank.

In 1920, three years after the Bolsheviks seized power, two of England's most influential writers, Bertrand Russell and H. G. Wells, made trips to Moscow to converse with Lenin. Each recorded his negative impressions in a book. Russell's *Practice*

and *Theory of Bolshevism* is the more perceptive of the two books, but it is still in print and widely known. Here I shall focus on the book by Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, because it has been almost totally forgotten. It deserves to be read today for three reasons: its vivid account of Russian chaos following the first world war, its portrait of Lenin, and its insights into Wells' early opinions of Marx and the future of Russia.

Wells made three visits to Russia. The first, accompanied by Maurice Baring, was in 1914, just before the outbreak of war, to see his old friend Maxim Gorky. Gorky's secretary and mistress was then the Countess Benckendorff, formerly Moura Zakrevskaya. She had been planted on Gorky as a government spy. But Moura had told Gorky this. Admiring her straightforwardness, Gorky did not seem to mind.

In 1920, when Wells returned to Russia, Gorky (a personal friend of Lenin) arranged for Moura to be Wells' guide and interpreter. Although there is no hint of it in Wells' book, he fell passionately in love with her. The full story of this beautiful and witty woman has yet to be told, although Anthony West, Wells' illegitimate son by Rebecca West, devotes many pages to her in his biography of Wells. "My father could not reason himself out of his intoxication with her, and however little future his passion might seem to have, he went home with it burning in him."

Wells' account of his 1920 trip first ran as a series of articles in London's *Sunday Express*, instantly boosting that paper's cir-

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