

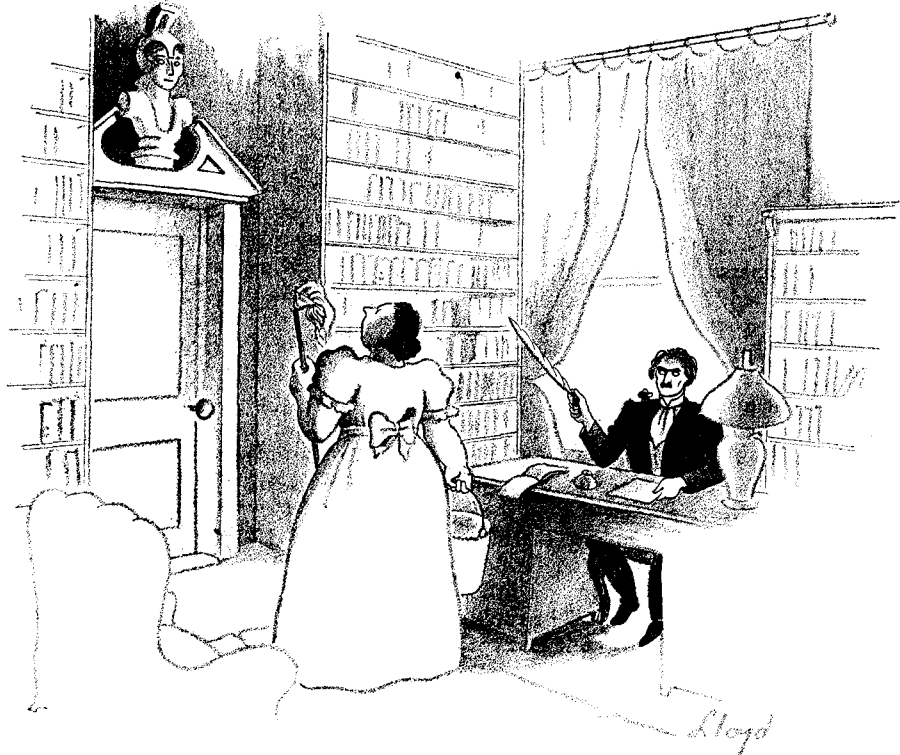
# Letters to the Editor: *The Freedom of the Press; Debunking the Nightingale*

## Opinion and Ownership

SIR:—George Seldes's book on freedom of the press raises a very important question which he does not appear to recognize. Most of the faults of the press of today, as well as some of its virtues, are ultimately traceable to one thing: private ownership. Sometimes Seldes seems to recognize this and sometimes not; as when he wishes that newspaper owners would turn over complete control of their papers to the editors. This would undoubtedly give us better newspapers, on the whole; but it is fantastic to expect it under present conditions. A man who owns a newspaper usually does so for one of two reasons: (a) he expects to make money out of it, or (b) he wants to defend certain political and economic ideas, personal or partisan, and is willing to dip into his private fortune if necessary to meet the deficit. In either case, he is unlikely to give somebody else complete control of the policies which might make a difference between profit and loss. George Jones did so fifty years ago, but when comes such another? So long as newspapers are owned by individuals, families, or groups which will have to dig down into their pockets if the paper loses money, we are going to have such disgraceful incidents as the behavior of the overwhelming majority of American newspapers in the so-called freedom-of-the-press agitation of last year.

Yet (and I call this to Mr. Seldes's reflective attention) how would newspapers be financed if private ownership and the profit system were done away with? Presumably by the government, which would under even the mildest collectivist system have at least a negative control over the allocation of capital; and is any government likely to give a better break to its opponents than is now given them by the private owners of American newspapers? Mr. Seldes is a radical but he does not like a totalitarian press even when it is on his side; he would want a free press even if he lived in a Socialist state. But freedom would imply freedom for conservative papers as well. Mr. Seldes is grieved because the *New York Times*, for instance, is conservative. But his remedy of turning the newspapers over to their editors would not cure that; fifteen years ago, at least, the majority of *Times* editorial writers and news executives were more conservative than the publisher, and I imagine that is true still. Would a radical government put up the money for a conservative *Times* whose chief editorial function would be criticism of the government? No doubt it would, in a perfect state; but if we had the raw material of a perfect state our present condition would be better than it is.

For the sake of the record, let it be said that I agree with many of Mr. Seldes's criticisms of the existent press (though by no means with all of his admirations) and that my political and economic opinions are about the same as his. But it is time for all of us who believe that freedom of opinion is perfectly compatible with a collectivized economic system to



"YOU'D BETTER SEE TO PALLAS ATHENA, MOLLY; THERE'S BEEN A RAVEN ON IT."

(Addenda to Literature—Number 4)

begin thinking hard about just such details as this, in hope that somebody may hit upon the right answer.

ELMER DAVIS.

Mystic, Conn.

## Coleridge and the Nightingale

SIR:—Your editorial, "Debunking the Nightingale," might well have been suggested by an English poem which you don't mention. When you say, "Only two English poets, so far as we are aware, have written truth of the nightingale . . . Shakespeare and Wordsworth," you surely overlook Coleridge's "The Nightingale," the truest and fullest description in English of the bird's song. Coleridge anticipated you in debunking the poetical nightingale, but so far as his poem was concerned, Keats, Arnold, and Bridges "had ears in vain." If Wordsworth, as you say, "recognized the cheerful 'tumultuous harmony' of the nightingale's song," it was probably because Coleridge or Dorothy had pointed it out to him. At all events, Coleridge's poem is the earlier one. Here are some lines which parallel your reflections.

A melancholy bird! O idle thought!  
In Nature there is nothing melancholy.  
But some night-wandering man, whose  
heart was pierced  
With the remembrance of a grievous  
wrong,  
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,  
. . . . . he and such as he

First named these notes a melancholy strain,  
And many a poet echoes the conceit.

My Friend, and thou, our Sister! we  
have learnt  
A different lore; we may not thus profane  
Nature's sweet voices, always full of love  
And joyance! 'Tis the merry Nightingale  
That crowds and hurries and precipitates  
With fast thick warble his delicious notes,  
As he were fearful that an April night  
Would be too short for him to utter forth  
His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul  
Of all its music!

As to the thrush, how, in view of "When Lilacs Last in Dooryard Bloomed," can you say that Whitman was "too gross" to do him justice? And by the way, should an editorial debunking the poetical birds refer to the singer as feminine ("let her sing her own song")?

HOMER E. WOODBRIDGE.

Woodland Park, Colo.

"She" was used of temperament rather than of egg-laying or song-making proclivities. I used "he" for the mockingbird. As for Whitman, his "reedy song" may have made me unfair. "Pure deliberate notes" is excellent.—The Editor.

# How Not to Be Neutral

WAR MEMORIES OF ROBERT LANSING, Secretary of State. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company. 1935. \$3.50.

Reviewed by FRANK H. SIMONDS

APPEARING on the morrow of that panic which seized an exhausted Congress and swept it into a paroxysm of legislations designed to keep the United States out of the next World War, visibly impending, this book has patent timeliness. In fact, it might well have been called "How not to be neutral." For, in itself, it reveals a state of mind in the Wilson Administration which insured American belligerency. It then teaches by example, but by bad example.

In many ways Lansing was the ideal under-secretary of state. He had the hard, shrewd common sense of the up-state New Yorker. He knew a good deal about law and not a little about the history and traditions of American foreign policy. He had no imagination and little initiative. Not quite a "yes-man" he could advise a "no" alternative, but if it were rejected he was tempted not to resign but to make the best of it. In the end he was ejected from office brutally and bore injustice with great dignity. Under other circumstances he would have been, if not a great secretary of state, a sound and safe adviser.

Called suddenly to be the successor of Bryan, when "the great commoner" with a courage and consistency today commanding a respect it once failed to enlist, resigned rather than sign a Lusitania Note which he saw clearly was a first step toward involvement in the great struggle, Lansing came to his high office already convinced that the United States must go in. As early as July 11, 1915, he wrote a memorandum entitled "Consideration and Outline of Policies." In that he set down this final conviction—

Germany must not be permitted to win this war or to break even, though to prevent it this country is forced to take an active part. This ultimate necessity must be constantly in our minds in all our controversies with the belligerents. American public opinion must be prepared for the time, which may come, when we will have to cast aside our neutrality and become one of the champions of democracy.

In simple terms, this meant that the American Secretary of State, while recognizing the necessity to make formal protests against British invasion of American rights, was resolved not to go beyond formality because he saw in Germany an eventual enemy. After the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Lansing became one of the "believers in active support of the Allies." He realized, however, "that the sensible thing to do was to defer action until by a gradual process of education and enlightenment the American people had

been brought to a full understanding of the design of the German Government to become overlord of the world."

On July 14, moreover, he made the shrewd observation to the President that the American people, while resolved against war were equally insistent that their own government should not "recede a step from its position but compel Germany to submit to our demands." To carry out such ideas, he realized and reported was a task "well nigh impossible." It was, in fact, a *totally* impossible task, even had the minister, whose duty it was to undertake it believed in the experiment, which he frankly did not.

On the contrary he saw us presently fighting with the Allies against the Germans and he accurately conjectured that when that moment arrived, we should not want to be handicapped in our struggle by any inconvenient support of principles and neutral rights during the provisional period of non-participation. He distrusted the British, he was more than convinced that they were not only using illegal methods to bring about German defeat but

exploiting the invasion of our undoubted rights to the detriment of our legitimate trade and commerce. About the English, he had no illusions. For Walter Hines Page, become pacifically penetrated with British pretensions and propaganda, he had at most only tolerant pity. But he was a realist and says of his views—

In dealing with the British Government there was always in my mind the conviction that we would ultimately become an ally of Great Britain and that it would not do, therefore, to let out controversies reach a point where diplomatic correspondence gave place to actions.

Obviously the Germans were not likely to be taken in by any such procedure. And they were not. Technically they had no ground for complaint, actually, the United States was within its rights, but practically it was not neutral.

The objective of the Secretary of State was not neutrality but belligerency. His strategy was to seem neutral until American public opinion finally became sufficiently aroused against Germany and then

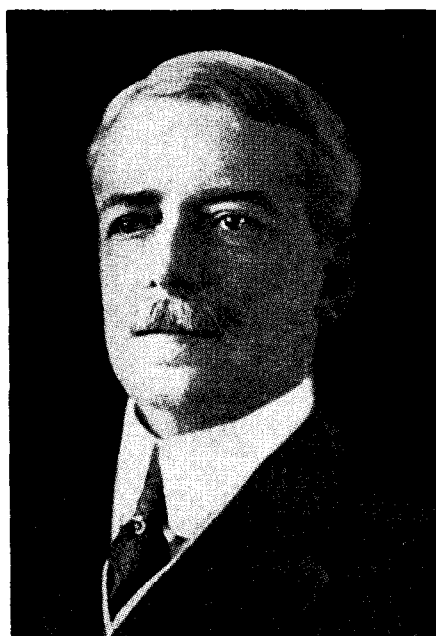
to act. Wilson, by contrast, believed it was possible to uphold American rights and avoid American involvement. But when, in March, 1916, the Germans sank the *Sussex*, Lansing thought the moment to strike had come. Accordingly he advised Wilson to speak "without subterfuge or evasion." He wanted to break off relations, but Wilson demurred and, for the moment, Germany temporized. This apparent victory for a policy seeking to uphold rights by peaceful means was responsible for Wilson's re-election, but Lansing was not fooled and, hard on the heels of the triumph at the polls, came the exposure of the bankruptcy of the policy responsible for that triumph.

By the autumn of 1916, however, with his election won and his neutrality policy apparently triumphant, Wilson's imagination, powerfully stimulated by the suggestions of Colonel House, had soared far above and beyond the limits of conventional conduct of foreign relations. By that time, he was dreaming his great dream of restoring world peace and making it permanent. Already he had ceased to be the American President and was thinking of himself as the World Prophet of peace. And the first step was to bring the warring countries to conference. But

of the futility of such an attempt Lansing was well aware "for the conditions made accomplishment practically impossible."

Lansing so advised the President, but the President persisted. He sounded out the ambassadors of the several belligerent powers. But, meantime the German Government stole his "show" and launched a peace offensive of their own. As a consequence, when Wilson's great note was published, he seemed to London and Paris to be only the tool of Berlin, the conscious or unconscious accessory of the Kaiser in an operation designed to break down Allied morale.

The first "adventure in peace" was thus a "dud." But thereafter the Germans went back to the unlimited submarine warfare and the United States became a belligerent. Meantime, when the Peace Note had been published, the Secretary of State suddenly intervened and told an astonished nation, satisfied that the President had "kept us out of war" definitively, that "the sending of the note will indicate the possibility of our being forced into



ROBERT LANSING