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H. L. Mencken's 'Days Trilogy: Expanded Edition'

By P. J. O'ROURKE
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If we exclude Mark Twain, whose reminiscences suffered the rapine of fiction and whose attempt at autobiography is a mess, the three best memoir writers in American literature are H. L. Mencken.

The Library of America has issued "Happy Days," "Newspaper Days" and "Heathen Days" in a single volume that contains a chronology of Mencken's life and useful notes to help us identify figures of immortal renown, some forgotten for 100 years. More important, the edition includes Mencken's previously unpublished additions to, corrections of and commentaries on his own books — a retrospective upon retrospectives sufficient in length to turn "The Days Trilogy" into a quartet.

H. L. Mencken was a self-esteeming, even self-obsessed, man who began subscribing to a clipping service for news about himself when he was 23. He donated so much Menckeniana to the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore that it fills eight collections and spills over. But in his memoirs Mencken manages the prestidigitation of absorbing readers under his magic cloak of self-absorption. He turns his specific detail of the workaday into a universal generality of jubilee.

Mencken does it by leaving out what might bore him or — in his office as locum tenens for the reader — us. For example, in "Happy Days," which covers the years until he is 12, his younger sister is mentioned only once.

When Mencken is interested, he goes to work with a writing style that retired undefeated. The hot dogs of his time were served in pastry shells, not "the soggy rolls prevailing today, of ground acorns, plaster of paris, flecks of bath sponge and atmospheric air all compact."

Mencken applies the balm of humor to raw nostalgia. He caps an obligatory yarn of childhood play by stating: "A few years ago . . . I encountered a ma'm in horn-rimmed spectacles teaching a gang of little girls ring-around-a-rosy. The sight filled me suddenly with so black an indignation that I was tempted to grab the ma'm and heave her into the goldfish pond. In the days of my own youth no bossy female on the public payroll was needed to teach games."

And Mencken expresses a warm honesty about the cold heart of a child. “Happy Days” ends with the death of his grandfather. “The day was a Thursday — and they’d certainly not bury the old man until Sunday. No school tomorrow!”

The same Mencken expression, unblinking but unfrowning, is turned upon the press. “Newspaper Days” and “Heathen Days” are correctives for those who lament the present media’s sensationalism, and curatives for those who think newsmongers go around speaking truth to power.

Journalism, Mencken explains, is fun, “especially for a young reporter to whom all the major catastrophes and imbecilities of mankind were still more or less novel, and hence delightful.” And “a newspaperman always saw that show from a reserved seat in the first row.”

When he wasn’t part of the show himself. Sundays were light on news when Mencken was at The Baltimore Morning Herald in 1903 — until “a wild man was reported loose in the woods . . . with every dog barking for miles around, and all women and children locked up. I got special delight out of the wild man, for I had invented him myself.”

“Journalism,” Mencken notes, “is not an exact science.”

And partisanship was a newsman’s obligation. When Mencken was at The Baltimore Sun, its editor, Charles H. Grasty, and the city’s mayor, James H. Preston, were engaged in a furious quarrel. To condense Mencken slightly: “If Preston, as mayor, proposed to enlarge the town dog pound, Grasty denounced it . . . as an assault upon the solvency of Baltimore, the comity of nations and the Ten Commandments, and if Grasty argued . . . that the town alleys ought to be cleaned oftener, Preston went about the ward clubs warning his heelers that the proposal was only the opening wedge for anarchy, atheism and cannibalism.”

“In my daily column,” Mencken writes, “I accused Preston of each and every article in my private catalog of infamies. . . . I was fond of him, thought he was doing well as mayor, and often met him amicably at beer parties.”

Mencken became famous as a writer of opinion pieces. Here he is in “Prejudices: Fifth Series,” published in 1926, editorializing on William Jennings Bryan: “a charlatan, a mountebank, a zany without sense or dignity . . . deluded by a childish theology, full of an almost pathological hatred of all learning, . . . all beauty, all fine and noble things. . . . Imagine a gentleman, and you have imagined everything that he was not.”

But before anyone is tempted into the editorializing field, he or she should read Mencken on the subject: “If anyone in the city room had ever spoken of an editorial in his own paper as cogent and illuminating, he would have been set down as a jackass for admiring it and as a kind of traitor to honest journalism for reading it at all.”

An advantage to having all three “Days” books and their addenda in one place is that we get a full picture of Mencken. And we need one. He was a man born with many contradictions who set out to bring each of them into a perfect state of conundrum.

Mencken was perhaps the most convivial curmudgeon ever. In the course of 795 pages of text, he reports, I believe, not going to only two parties. Once (and seemingly only once), he wasn't invited. And once there was a boozefest hosted by a man so notorious for supporting Prohibition, even Mencken's fondness for hypocrisy was overcome.

Mencken was so perfectly attuned to the period from the end of World War I to Franklin Roosevelt's election in 1932 that in the next period he was obliterated. At the low ebb of his popularity, when being forced to resign from *The Sun* for his antiwar and anti-Roosevelt views, he turned his full attention to his memoirs. They were all successful.

He was an atheist who said of religion, "Dismissing the thing itself as a mere aberration is a proceeding that is far more lofty than sensible."

He was a nearly lifelong bachelor with an encyclopedic knowledge of Baltimore's houses of ill repute who, in his 50s, became the devoted husband of a Goucher College professor dying of tuberculosis.

He was, with a trade school education, the pre-eminent scholar of the American language.

He remains a hero to conservatives, although he called a reporter friend "a congenital and incurable Republican," and held firmly to the wisdom that "in politics a man must learn to rise *above* principle."

He is an idol of libertarians for his animadversion upon the nanny state's "vast rabble of inspectors, smellers, spies and bogus experts." Never mind his racism and anti-Semitism — of which he had the midcentury white middle-class man's standard complement.

Others have made so much of Mencken's racist attitudes and anti-Semitic statements that there's not much more left to make. Mencken liked to combine Enoch Pratt erudition with the back-alley vulgate and did so at a time of great racial and ethnic vulgarity.

Mencken's taste was untrustworthy. A well-read man, he praised Dreiser and disdained George Eliot. An ardent amateur musician, he had "an intense distaste for vocal music," and he thought of "even the most gifted Wagnerian soprano as no more than a blimp fitted with a calliope."

For all his prejudices, it would have been utterly inconsistent for the Mencken we get to know in these books not, in 1931, to publish a series of outraged and threat-inducing articles on the lynching of a Maryland black man, causing *The Nation* to recognize Mencken for "distinguished journalism in the face of personal danger."

Or, in 1938, to write a column proposing the United States open its borders to Jews fleeing Nazi persecution.

Or, in 1948, in his last published column, to argue against segregation.

THE DAYS TRILOGY

Expanded Edition

By H. L. Mencken

Edited by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers

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P. J. O'Rourke is the H. L. Mencken research fellow at the Cato Institute.