



Henry Louis Mencken (1880 - 1956)

by [Gibbons Burke](#)

The most prominent newspaperman, book reviewer, and political commentator of his day, Henry Louis Mencken was a libertarian before the word came into usage. His prose is as clear as an azure sky, and his rhetoric as deadly as a rifle shot. Frequent targets of his lance were Franklin Roosevelt and New Deal politics, [Comstocks](#), hygenists, "uplifters", social reformers of any stripe, boobs & quacks, and the insatiable American appetite for nonsense and gaudy sham. But his life was not defined by negativity. He was positively enthusiastic about the writings of Twain and Conrad, the music of Brahms, Beethoven and Bach, and the [victuals](#) offered up by Chesapeake Bay.

Mencken's writing is endearing because of its wit, its crisp style, and the obvious delight he takes in it. The Introduction to *The Impossible H.L. Mencken: A Collection of His Best Newspaper Stories*, edited by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers which relates Mencken's manner while reporting on the presidential conventions:

No other entertainment gave him greater pleasure than reporting from the conventions; nor did anyone appreciate his efforts more than Mencken himself. One reporter, peering through Mencken's window late at night after one rally, recalled watching him at work alone in his hotel room, pounding out copy on a typewriter propped on a desk. He would type a few sentences, read them, slap his thigh, toss his head back, and roar with laughter. Then he would type some more lines, guffaw, and so on until the end of the article.

A cigar jammed in the side of Mencken's mouth completes the image. Rare is the picture of him

without one in a hand, his mouth, or a nearby ashtray. (His father was the owner of Baltimore's Mencken Cigar Company, which provided Mencken his first gainful employment, which he ditched not long after his father's death to become a cub reporter.) Here's Mencken's assessment of life in the United States:

We live in a land of abounding quackeries, and if we do not learn how to laugh we succumb to the melancholy disease which afflicts the race of viewers-with-alarm... In no other country known to me is life as safe and agreeable, taking one day with another, as it is in These States. Even in a great Depression few if any starve, and even in a great war the number who suffer by it is vastly surpassed by the number who fatten on it and enjoy it. Thus my view of my country is predominantly tolerant and amiable. I do not believe in democracy, but I am perfectly willing to admit that it provides the only really amusing form of government ever endured by mankind.

Mencken's Creed

I believe that religion, generally speaking, has been a curse to mankind - that its modest and greatly overestimated services on the ethical side have been more than overcome by the damage it has done to clear and honest thinking.

I believe that no discovery of fact, however trivial, can be wholly useless to the race, and that no trumpeting of falsehood, however virtuous in intent, can be anything but vicious.

I believe that all government is evil, in that all government must necessarily make war upon liberty...

I believe that the evidence for immortality is no better than the evidence of witches, and deserves no more respect.

I believe in the complete freedom of thought and speech...

I believe in the capacity of man to conquer his world, and to find out what it is made of, and how it is run.

I believe in the reality of progress.

I - But the whole thing, after all, may be put very simply. I believe that it is better to tell the truth than to lie. I believe that it is better to be free than to be a slave. And I believe that it is better to know than to be ignorant.

A bigot?

When the Enoch Pratt Free Library decided to publish Mencken's diary in book form, it revealed Mencken to be even less politically correct than was already apparent from his huge body of work. Many condemned Mencken as a racist and an anti-Semite.

Novelist Gore Vidal (*Burr, Lincoln*) addresses Mencken's supposed bigotry in a [Foreword](#) to Marion Elizabeth Rodgers' *The Impossible H. L. Mencken*:

... A babble of words that no one understands now fills the airwaves, and language loses all meaning as we sink slowly, mindlessly, into herstory rather than history because most rapists are men, aren't they?

Mencken is a nice antidote. Politically, he is often right but seldom correct by today's stern standards. In a cheery way, he dislikes most minorities and if he ever had a good word to say about the majority of his countrymen, I have yet to come across it. Recently, when his letters were published, it was discovered that He Did Not Like the Jews, and that he had said unpleasant things about them not only as individuals but In General, plainly the sign of a Hitler-Holocaust enthusiast. So shocked was everyone that even the *New York Review of Books'* unofficial de-anti-Semitiser, Garry Wills (he salvaged Dickens, barely), has yet to come to his aid with An Explanation. But in Mencken's private correspondence, he also snarls at black Americans, Orientals, Britons, women,

and WASPs, particularly the clay-eating Appalachians, whom he regarded as subhuman. But private irritability is of no consequence when compared to what really matters, public action.

Far from being an anti-Semite, Mencken was one of the first journalists to denounce the persecution of the Jews in Germany at a time when the *New York Times*, say, was notoriously reticent. On November 27, 1938, Mencken writes (*Baltimore Sun*), "It is to be hoped that the poor Jews now being robbed and mauled in Germany will not take too seriously the plans of various politicians to rescue them." He then reviews the various schemes to "rescue" the Jews from the Nazis, who had not yet announced their own final solution.

John Webb has written a thoughtful and sincere essay "[Mencken:Race](#)" on this subject included in his excellent set of [web pages](#) about the Sage.

All wet?

Mencken was also a staunch *wet*, meaning he was against Prohibition from start to finish. He coined a term *ombibulous* to describe his prejudice in favor of alcohol and against the affront to liberty that Prohibition imposed on the Republic. "I'm ombibulous. I drink every known alcoholic drink and enjoy them all." Bud Johns has written "[The Ombibulous Mr. Mencken](#)", a chronicle in book form of Mencken's views on the merits of alcohol and the demerits of Prohibition. Here's one such nugget from *The American Mercury*:

Five years of Prohibition have had, at least, this one benign effect: they have completely disposed of all the favorite arguments of the Prohibitionists. None of the great boons and usufructs that were to follow the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment has come to pass. There is not less drunkenness in the Republic, but more. There is not less crime, but more. There is not less insanity, but more. The cost of government is not smaller, but vastly greater. Respect for law has not increased, but diminished.

Mencken gives good quote. A prolific writer, he was also a collector of quotations; he published *A New Dictionary of Quotations* in 1942 (still available through [Laissez Faire Books](#).) Unlike the familiar [Bartlett's Familiar Quotations](#), which is organized by author in a rough chronological order, Mencken orders his quotations into categories by subject, which allows you to find all the familiar sayings on a topic in one place. Mencken doesn't include any of his own sayings in this volume, however there are several attributed to "Writer unidentified" which sound distinctly Mencken.

Mencken and Jean Nathan's *Smart Set* magazine was known for its pithy epigrams. They were so popular that the magazine was selling them to be shown in movie theaters to entertain the audience until the feature was shown. Mencken's epigrammatic style owes a tremendous debt to the philosophy of Nietzsche and the style of Ambrose Bierce's [The Devil's Dictionary](#). Here are several collections of *Menckeniana*, the first, a sampling of a few of my favorites:

Short Quotations

- [My favorites](#)
- [A large collection \(111K\) of Mencken quote bites](#)
- A well indexed collection of quotations at [Freedom's Nest](#)
- [John Webb's collection](#)
- [Watchful Eye](#) by Bruce MacLeod
- [Bruce McLeod's collection](#)

- An atheist's [selection](#) of Mencken on and against organized religion.
- [Donald Simanek's Large Collection](#) - mostly from *Minority Report*
- ``[Mencken Sees Tranquility Arise in U.S. From Ashes of Prohibition](#)'' an interview by Sheila Graham published in 1933
- [Art Glenn's](#) collection.
- [Quoteland](#)
- Marko Maattanen's [collection](#) from Finland

Larger Works

- [Auroral](#). - a poem by Henry L. Mencken
- [The American Language](#): An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States, 2nd ed. (1921)
- [In Defense of Women](#)
- [Prejudices, First Series](#)
- ``[A Bum's Christmas](#)''
- ``[The Declaration of Independence in American](#)''
- ``[On Being an American](#)'' from *Prejudices, Fourth Series*, 1922
- ``[A Constitution for the New Deal](#)''
- ``[Where is the graveyard of dead gods?](#)'' from *Treatise on the Gods*
- ``[Criticism of Criticism of Criticism](#)'' - *modus operandi*
- ``[The Hills of Zion](#)'' - an account of a tent revival during [the Scopes Trial](#).
- ``[A Neglected Anniversary](#)'' - the original Bathtub Hoax
 - An account of the hoax entitled ``[Millard Fillmore's Bathtub](#)''
 - Another [account](#) of the hoax at Spintech magazine
 - ``[Hymn to the Truth](#)'' - the author of the famous Bathtub Hoax 'fesses up
- ``[The Passing of Gilbert](#)'' - Mencken's obituary of William Schwenck Gilbert
- ``[The Malevolent Jobholder](#)'' from *The American Mercury*, 1924 June, pp. 156-159
- ``[Mencken calls tennis order silly](#)'' from the Baltimore Evening Sun, 1948 November 9
- A huge collection of [extracts](#) from Mencken writings.
- A [criticism of Justice Holmes](#) in an *American Mercury* book review.
- ``[A Book for the Gourmet](#)'' - a review of a culinary dictionary, with an essay on the proper way to prepare soft shell crab.
- [Selections](#) from *A Mencken Chrestomathy*
- Coverage of [The Scopes Trial](#)
 - [Homo Neanderthalensis](#) (June 29, 1925)
 - [Sickening Doubts About Publicity](#) (June 29, 1925)
 - [Impossibility of Obtaining Fair Jury](#) (July 10, 1925)
 - [Trial as Religious Orgy](#) (July 11, 1925)
 - [Souls Need Reconversion Nightly](#) (July 13, 1925)
 - [Darrow's Eloquent Appeal](#) (July 14, 1925)
 - [Law and Freedom](#) (July 15, 1925)
 - [Fair Trial Beyond Ken](#) (July 16, 1925)
 - [Malone the Victor](#) (July 17, 1925)
 - [Genesis Triumphant](#) (July 18, 1925)
 - [Tennessee in the Frying Pan](#) (July 20, 1925)
 - [Bryan](#) (July 27, 1925)
 - [Aftermath](#) (September 14, 1925)
 - [Darrow vs. Bryan](#) (Associated Press Coverage)
 - More of Mencken's [Scopes Trial](#) coverage.
- ``[Mark Twain's Americanism](#)'' (November 1, 1917)

- ["On Democracy"](#)
- ["The Land of the Free"](#)
- ["Thomas Henry Huxley"](#)
- ["The Uplifters Try it Again"](#) from The Baltimore Evening Sun, 1924
- ["A Gang of Pecksniffs"](#) - advice to writers of editorials from an address to the National Conference of Editorial Writers in Washington on Oct. 14, 1947
- ["Martyrs"](#) - Smart Set, April 1922
- ["The Chiropractic"](#)
- ["Professor Veblen"](#)

Biographies and other Essays About Mencken

- [The Library of Congress](#) - from their ["Today in History"](#) series commemorating Mencken's birthdate on 12 September 1880.
- [The Enoch Pratt Library](#) in Baltimore, where Mencken's papers and manuscripts are preserved in The Mencken Room.
- [Bartleby.com](#)
- [Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th Edition](#)
- [Encyclopedia Britannica](#)
- [Foreword](#) by Gore Vidal to *The Impossible H. L. Mencken* by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers
- An [interview](#) on CSPAN Booknotes with Charles Fecher who edited *The Diary of H. L. Mencken*.
- ["By His Own Rules: H. L. Mencken, A Cigar Always in Hand, Was the Most Influential Commentator of his Time"](#) by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers in Cigar Afficionado magazine.
- Mencken and [the American South](#) by Fred Hobson, author of *Mencken: A Life*.
- A brief history of [The American Mercury](#) magazine.
- A [review](#) of *H. L. Mencken Revisited* by William H. A. Williams
- [H. L. Mencken](#) by Walter Lippman
- [Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken in the South](#) by Fred Hobson - Mencken biographer examines Mencken's love-hate relationship with the South. He explores not only Mencken's savage criticisms of the region but also his efforts to encourage southern writers.
- A [short](#) essay.
- ["God, Man, and H. L. Mencken"](#) by George Weigel
- [Absent Voices](#) by Richard Mitchell
- [Introduction to H.L. Mencken 101](#) by Keith Otis
- [Satan and his bootleg apples](#) - a review of *Treatise on the Gods* by Keith Otis
- [A healthy disrespect for authority](#) by Frank Forman
- [Mencken and the Oral Tradition](#) by Leo Elliott published in *Menckenia*, the journal of Mencken Society
 - Other [articles](#) from *Menckenia*

The Hatrack Case

- [Mencken and the Hatrack Case](#)
- [Herbert Asbury](#) - the author of *Up from Methodism* who sold Mencken the magazine with the "Hatrack" article, which was to be a chapter in Asbury's book.
- Because of Mencken's experience with the Hatrack case, he testified in [Esquire v. Walker](#) in which case the men's magazine was brought before the law for publishing Vargas paintings of pin-up nudes.

Other Mencken Web Pages

- A [bibliography](#) of Mencken-related works located at Goucher College.
- The [Mencken Collection](#) at Princeton University
- [John Webb's Mencken page](#)
- [Jim Parinella's Mencken page](#)
- [Armstrong University](#)

Other Mencken Resources

- Mencken's [House](#) at 1524 Hollins Street, Baltimore, Maryland. The house is owned by the city, but stands empty and closed. [The Friends of the H. L. Mencken House](#) are working to restore the house so that it may be re-opened. They need your help.
- His [gravestone](#)
- [The Mencken Society](#)
- Books by Mencken are available from [Laissez-Faire Books](#)
- The [Mencken FAQ](#)
- A Mencken [bibliography](#)
- A [listing of persons](#) mentioned in Mencken's writing with brief biographies.

Photo Gallery

- Mencken didn't limit his keyboard-banging to typewriters: here's a July 1942 [portrait of Mencken at his piano](#) from the [Carl Van Vechten](#) collection at the [Library of Congress](#).
- [Reading the Newspaper](#) - "Beer: It's not just for breakfast anymore."
- A [young](#) Mencken.
- A photograph of [Mencken at the Scopes Trial](#) (cigar in mouth in left background) along with Malone, Steward, Bryan, Raulston and Clarence Darrow.
- Mencken with his [cigar](#).

[[Gibbons Burke's home page.](#)]

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