WASHINGTON POST

Investigative Reporting

Reviewed by
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Book World

THE NEW MUCKRAKERS. By Leonard Downie Jr.
(New Republic. 269 pp. $10)

You might be forgiven for thinking that this was going to be just another book of the film of the book. But you would be wrong.

This is a thoroughly readable, indeed absorbing account of the recent boom in investigative journalism in the United States. It raises, but to my mind stops short of doing full justice to, the important political, moral and professional issues involved.

Leonard Downie is the metropolitan editor of The Washington Post. As everyone knows now, it fell to those hard-working and relatively unsung men, the Metro staff, to inform the citizens of Washington about a certain burglary at the Democratic National Committee's offices. One of the many consequences of those events has been that men whose lights might have remained hidden under a green eyeshade have become celebrities, and Leonard Downie is one of them.

And so inevitably his book begins with the twice-told tale of the stardust twins of The Washington Post (if that phrase embarrasses you, it's not mine, it's the metropolitan editor's).

Leonard Downie may have interesting things to say about the real Bob Woodward, the historic Bernstein, and his portraits are certainly unvarnished. He is especially sharp with Bernstein whom he charges (pre-Watergate) with "lying" as well as with most of the warm-hearted sins. Only serious Watergate addicts, though, would find this book worth buying for its newsroom view of the great national morality play.

And in fact the stardust twins only twinkle through the first chapter. The rest of the book sketches the personalities and working methods, and chronicles the feats, of other investigative reporters, from I. F. Stone and Carey McWilliams to young tearaways of the underground press, stopping by to visit some of the most interesting journalists now working in America.

The second chapter, no doubt also inevitably, is on Woodward and Bernstein's arch-rival, Seymour Hersh of The New York Times.

According to a quoted remark by John Marks, author of "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence," Hersh was never really happy working on Watergate because "He was never No. 1 to outsiders . . . You have to have a big ego problem when you're the world's greatest investigative reporter."

Now, no one would want to underestimate Hersh's extraordinary string of achievements — My Lai, General Lavelle and the unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam, and the revelation of the CIA's illegal activity in the U.S. have been only the peaks of his range. And, again, it is easy to forgive Hersh a certain pique at being deprived of the glory for the greatest coup of all.

But what fascinates me in that remark, and in Downie's account of Hersh generally, is how close the attitude of at least some American investigative reporters is to the competitive model of the corporate and political world they spend their time embarrassing.

I found Downie's chapters successively more interesting, therefore, as we moved away from the "mainstream." I was intrigued by his account of Donald Barlett and James Steele of The Philadelphia Inquirer, whose big investigations—into housing subsidy fraud and criminal justice in Philadelphia, then into oil companies, tax evasion and foreign aid—depend more on painstaking use of "dull" official records than on dramatic interrogations or the sibylline utterances of mysterious sources.

This, I suspect, will be the investigative journalism with the longest and most important future: The sort of journalism which asks the right question, and sifts through masses of undramatic evidence to find the answer, and then quietly persuades the readers that a subject they thought was dull is not dull at all, and that most of what they thought they knew about that subject was not true.

Leonard Downie has been an investigative reporter himself, and he is particularly good on the rewards and pressures of the job: The subtle pressures when sources dry up, a reporter becomes less productive, his editors begin to lose faith in him, and the danger is that he may lose faith in himself; and the hardly less dangerous exhilaration of the chase.

There is nothing wrong with the joy of the chase in itself, it seems to me. Investigative journalism means telling the reader something somebody doesn't want him to know. Only some strong motivation will make a reporter persist in overcoming the difficulties about that kind of work. It is far, far easier to sit in an office and pen judicious comment.

The danger is that the hunt should become an end in itself. Then injustice and even cruelty may be done to the quarry. Equally important, the investigative journalist is in danger of becoming obsessed with his own prowess and technique; context and explanation can then disappear.

In a word, much investigative journalism still proceeds from the assumption that there are some things that people are up to that are generally agreed to be wrong, and the reporter's job is to expose these secret acts of wickedness.

More frequent, and more interesting, surely, are the cases where the reporter must not only discover information that is previously unknown, but also explain to the reader what it means.

What is overdue, in short, is a new synthesis between investigative and interpretative journalism. For a long time, Washington was overrun with "commentators," who spun the same hackneyed or untrue "facts" into predictable sermonettes. Then came the new muckrakers. Did they create a time of skepticism, as Downie suggests? Or were they the product of it?

In either case, I dissent from his hunch that the new era of muckraking will pass as abruptly as the first. There will be more and more things that those in power want to hide from us. We will need men and women who can find them, and can also teach us what they mean.