

Live on TV! Jack Ruby fires the shot killing Lee Harvey Oswald. Robert Jackson. Dallas Times Herald, won the Pulitzer Prize for still photo.

The Standard-Bearer

ROBERT JACKSON

A.J. Liebling

cism he did for *The New Yorker*. From 1945 until his death, he wrote a much-discussed



J. Liebling, who died in 1963, was a polymath who wrote on a vast array of topics — New York, Paris, boxing, horse racing, labor, gambling, Broadway life, Stendahl, gastronomy — but his reputation rests largely on the innovative press criti-

until his death, he wrote a much-discussed column for the magazine entitled "The Wayward Press," which set the standard for all subsequent press criticism.

A man of routine, Liebling rose each morning at 9:00 to find a thick stack of newspapers on his doorstep. After dislodging the cat from his favorite chair, he began to peruse them over his morning grapefruit, reading in the chair steadily until noon. If a story interested him, he would tear it out and stuff it into his pocket. His wife, Jean Stafford, recalled those daily sessions: "From time to time he laughed, now in amusement and now in disbelief; often, wrathful, he used rude language."

But his press criticism was never rude, merely elegant. His prose was brash and pungent, suffused with historical depth and literary flair. Raymond Sokolov, his biographer, notes: "He lampooned clichés, ferreted out blunders and illogicalities, and took some pretty hard socks at injustice." Liebling deplored the anticommunist fervor of the 1940s and 1950s and continually lashed the Hearst, Luce, and McCormick publications for their crude redbaiting and their anti-labor bias.

At the end of his life, Liebling commented frequently on the worrisome results of media concentration. In 1961, he noted that "of 1,461 American cities with daily newspapers, all but sixty-one were one-ownership towns — that is, monopolies." For the newspaper owner, it was a heavenly situation: "He gets all the advertising, all the circulation, and he can give, in return, exactly as much or little newspaper as his heart tells him. Newspaper proprietors are not distinguished as a class for large or talkative hearts." But he never descended into bitterness. Remarked Liebling shortly before his death: "I am an incorrigible optimist about newspapers." — S.S.

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