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THE LOST JOURNALISM OF **RING LARDNER**

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THE LOST
JOURNALISM
OF **RING**
LARDNER

Ring Lardner

Edited by Ron Rapoport

Foreword by James Lardner

University of Nebraska Press

Lincoln and London

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Set in Ehrhardt by Rachel Gould.

“A considerable body of first-rate
Lardner is entombed in back-
number magazines and
disintegrating newspapers.”

—MATTHEW J. BRUCCOLI
and RICHARD LAYMAN

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Foreword

James Lardner

My father was the third of Ring Lardner's four sons and got named after him over his publicly stated objections:

“When you are christened Ringworm by the humorists and wits;
When people pun about you till they drive you into fits;
When funny folks say “Ring, ring off,” until they make you ill,
Remember that your poor old dad tried hard to name you Bill.”

A songwriter on the side, my grandfather could sit down at the piano and play from memory long stretches of a Broadway show he had seen. He could work similar and greater wonders with the talk of ballplayers and other unschooled Americans. Many writers “tried to write the speech of the streets as adeptly and amusingly as he wrote it, and they all fell short of him,” H. L. Mencken said. “The next best was miles and miles behind.”

Mencken based this assessment of Ring Lardner largely on Lardner's short stories. It was the body of work that also led Edmund Wilson to compare him to Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf to hold him up as the best prose stylist in America even though he had a habit of writing “in language which is not English,” and Ian Frazier to judge him “the literary equivalent of a once-in-a-generation athlete, like Ty Cobb or Mariano Rivera.” But it was in his newspaper and magazine pieces where he honed and originally deployed his skills.

The *Chicago Tribune* set him loose by giving him a daily column in 1913. He filled it at first with inside dope about the Cubs and the White Sox, as expected; then, when the season ended and there were no more real games to cover, he told the story of a made-up game in the voice

of an unashamedly self-important slugger (not unlike Jack Keefe of the *You Know Me Al* stories that would start appearing in the *Saturday Evening Post* a year later). This slugger is fixated on a miscalled third strike that was “a mile outside,” he says, “but if I’d knew he was goin’ to call it on me, I coulda hit it ’way out o’ the park.” The story ends with an aside about a female spectator: “Ja see that doll in the box back o’ our bench? She couldn’t keep her eye off o’ me. We’ll get ’em tomorrow, the yellow, quittin’ dogs.”

Three years later came a short sketch that foreshadowed the darker and more elaborate “Haircut,” about a barbershop patron held captive to a monologue that begins with the senselessness of the conflict raging in France (“Most o’ them don’t even know what they’re fightin’ about. Nobody knows except the kaiser and the king and the fella that started it, and they don’t know themselves.”), moves on to praise for the president who had kept America out of the war (“All as I hope is that we don’t get mixed up in it. But I guess they’s no danger o’ that with Wilson at the hellum. We’d been mixed up long ago if Rusefelt was president.”), takes a poke at Wilson’s leadership chops (“Every time they sink a boat and kill a few hundred people he writes them another note and they say it was a mistake and they was aimin’ at a fish or somethin’”), and concludes with nostalgia for T.R. (“You wouldn’t never see them mon-keying with old Teddy that way”).

The *You Know Me Al* stories made Ring Lardner’s byline so precious that his editors started sending him to the same places they sent their serious reporters. At the 1924 Democratic convention he had instructions to seek an interview with William Jennings Bryan. “So I went to his room and rapped,” he relates, “and a voice says, who is it, and I told him the truth, and the voice says no, they’s nobody home. It was the same voice,” he adds, “that said we shouldn’t ought to crucifix mankind upon a cross of gold in 1896 or any other year.” That may have been as close as Ring Lardner came, in his many political assignments, to a scoop.

Once in a while a sense of historical duty caused him to tell a story straight. This impulse took hold of him when, for example, he was writing about Babe Ruth, or the Dempsey-Firpo fight, or the seventh game of the 1912 World Series, tragically lost by the New York Giants and the

great Christy Mathewson, who is described by Lardner at game's end sitting "on the New York players' bench with bowed head and drooping shoulders, with the tears streaming from his eyes, a man on whom his team's fortune had been staked and lost and a man who would have proven his clear title to trust reposed in him if his mates had stood by him in the supreme test." Students of baseball, football, and boxing history can learn much from these columns and from the excellent notes and introductions supplied by Ron Rapoport, an editor superbly well-matched to the task.

By contrast, the stories Ring Lardner filed from political conventions and other heavy-news venues often have the flavor of those *Daily Show* standups in front of a green screen; and there is something quite Stephen Colbert-like about his mock candidacies for mayor of Chicago in 1919 (promising "a bone-dry United States, but a ringing-wet Chicago") and for U.S. president in 1920 (on a platform of having the "prettiest middle name in the democrat party.")

His highbrow admirers—Edmund Wilson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others—tried to guilt-trip him into writing longer works about loftier subjects. But he knew his comfort zone and I, for one, am glad he never decided he was too much of a bigshot to spend time on, say, a contemporary retelling of the Snow White story in which she marries a "wealthy bond thief who liked them young," or a gossip column parody in which we learn that "George Gershwin is Sullivan-Gilberting with his own brother, Ira," and "Aleck Hamilton and Aaron Burr have phfft," or a gangster-movie riff on Verdi's "Rigoletto" in which the assassin "Frank Sparafucile" bemoans a spell of underemployment, singing:

"Since Christmas I have killed only one man.
This war is sure hell on a poor honest gunman.
My funds are so low it's beginning to scare me.
Have you a few lires on your clothing to spare me?"

And Rigoletto ("Rig") replies:

"I have a few lires on my clothing, but really
I haven't so much I could Sparafucile."

In 2013 the Library of America came out with a Ring Lardner anthology containing all the great short stories—“The Golden Honeymoon,” “I Can’t Breathe,” “Alibi Ike,” and the rest—along with much of his previously published fiction and some nonfiction. Thanks to Ron Rapoport and the University of Nebraska Press, we now have this rich collection of Ring’s journalism—work that was widely read in its day (his columns ran in as many as 150 newspapers) but then sat mostly undisturbed in archives for the better part of a century.

The British comic novelist David Lodge has identified two good reasons for reading Ring Lardner, and they both apply to this rediscovered journalism as much as to Ring’s short stories. One is his trailblazing place in modern American literature; the other, which Lodge has properly put first, is the fact that he was “a wonderfully entertaining writer” and one of “that select company of writers who can make posterity lift its head from the page and laugh aloud.”

Introduction

Ring Lardner was a journalist his entire working life. From his first articles as a sports reporter for the *South Bend Times*, where he covered Notre Dame football, minor league baseball, and local events, to the columns of radio criticism he wrote for the *New Yorker* just a few months before he died, Lardner never abandoned his roots.

Writers of fiction often begin their careers as reporters for newspapers or magazines, only to leave journalism behind when their novels or stories become successful. Not Ring Lardner. For all intents and purposes, Lardner pursued parallel careers, turning out the short stories that secured his place in American literature while carrying on as a journalist all the while.

His output was astonishing. Between 1913 and 1919 Lardner wrote more than sixteen hundred “In the Wake of the News” columns and other articles for the *Chicago Tribune*—which is to say he wrote virtually every day—even as he was publishing *You Know Me Al*, *Alibi Ike*, *Gullible’s Travels*, and *Champion*, among other stories. The fact that the overall quality of his columns remained so high, says Jonathan Yardley, one of Lardner’s biographers, “must be counted among the extraordinary accomplishments of American journalism.”

After leaving the *Tribune* and moving to Long Island, Lardner continued writing fiction and began writing for the theater as well. His primary outlet, though, was a weekly column for the Bell Syndicate that ran in more than 150 newspapers and reached some eight million readers. For three years he also wrote the continuity for a comic strip based on “You Know Me Al” that ran in many newspapers around the country. By then he was one of the most famous men in the United States and bigger than many of the stories he covered.

“Lardner Gives Real Dope on N.Y. Fans” read one newspaper headline over a column he wrote about the 1921 World Series. “Ring Lardner Will

Run If Coolidge Withdraws” appeared over a political column in 1924. And in 1922 there was this: “Lardner Balks at Knickers for Women.” He was consistently afforded this name-in-lights treatment, and since the Bell columns were accompanied by sketches drawn by Dick Dorgan, in which he was prominently featured, Lardner’s face was just as familiar to the public. When the *Indianapolis Star* wanted to tell its readers it would be publishing Lardner’s coverage of the 1925 World Series, it simply ran his picture under the headline “No Need to Introduce This Guy.”

Between 1919 and 1927 Lardner wrote more than five hundred columns for the Bell Syndicate, most of them as a weekly Letter to the Editor. He wrote about politics, war, prohibition, social conventions, family life on Long Island, sports, and any other topic that came into his mind. Occasionally he wrote extra pieces for the syndicate on the major events of the day. He covered the World Series, heavyweight championship fights, political conventions, the inauguration of Warren G. Harding, a disarmament conference held in Washington DC, an America’s Cup in New York, and more.

Lardner also wrote about the theater, which was a particular passion, as well as spoofs of opera plots and fairy tales, and he often included poems in his work. At the same time he wrote a number of nonfiction pieces for magazines, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Colliers*, which also published his short stories.

In assessing the sheer volume of this output, one question arises: where did he find the time? Lardner was not a recluse working undisturbed in a lonely garret. He had a wide circle of friends, was an avid golfer and bridge player, a regular theater-goer, a frequent traveler, a prolific letter-writer, an occasional visitor to the Algonquin Round Table, a loving husband, and a devoted father of four sons. For a number of years he was the bemused lord of a manor house in Great Neck, Long Island, where titans of business and show-business celebrities lived in close proximity and where the party scene was so relentless that his neighbor and drinking companion F. Scott Fitzgerald moved to France in order to get some work done. Lardner was also a drinker of legendary proportions—he and another neighbor, a silent movie actor named Tom Meighan, called themselves “two-bottle men”—which may have contributed to his death from tuberculosis at the age of forty-eight.

Because he was so busy, and because his Bell contract paid so well, Lardner abandoned writing fiction for three years after moving to Long Island. But when, at Fitzgerald's urging, a compilation of his early stories was published, and it was well received by both the public and critics, his editor, the legendary Maxwell Perkins, insisted that Lardner return to fiction. Lardner gave up the comic strip and within three months wrote "Haircut," his most anthologized short story. Over the last eight years of his life Lardner wrote fifty more short stories, two plays that appeared on Broadway, and three unproduced musicals—practicing journalism all the while.

The one constant in Lardner's fiction and journalism is his use of the vernacular, which depends on such literary aberrations as ungrammatical dialogue, misspellings, haphazard punctuation, and odd abbreviations. He must have driven his copy editors crazy. Indeed, a comparison of his Bell columns as they appeared in various newspapers shows that some editors "corrected" what he wrote. Thus, "instants" became "instance," "happly married men" became "happily married men," and so forth. Hugh Fullerton, the Chicago baseball writer who helped Lardner get several jobs early in his career, tells of a spring training trip they took with the Cubs to a small southern town where a telegraph operator had some trouble transmitting their copy. When Fullerton asked if it had finally been sent, the operator said, "Yours went all right, but that other fellow's was awful. It took me an hour or more to correct his spelling." To the extent Lardner learned of these and other outrages, they must have driven *him* crazy.

When Lardner took over the "In the Wake of the News" column at the *Tribune*, he inherited what had previously been little more than a collection of notes about sports. But almost from the beginning he indicated that he wasn't interested in simply stretching boundaries. He meant to break them altogether. Buried near the bottom of a column barely a week after his "Wake" debut in 1913 was an item bearing the title, "The Pennant Pursuit. A Novel. [By the Copy Boy.]:"

As Vern Dalton strode passed the gymnasium one day in April, bound for the college office, where he was going to make arrangements for entering the

college next fall, the ball nine composed of 20 (twenty) or more members came out on its way to the athletic feild. O said Verne I wonder if Ill ever have a posichion on that team and figth for the glory of my ama mather, but he did not have much hope because his parents had said he must devoat all his time to study. (To be continued.)

This was Lardner's first shaky attempt at using the vernacular in print and would soon be followed by others. Lardner also expanded the boundaries of the column's subject matter. He wrote numerous poems and song lyrics and told of his growing family. (To a reader who complained these columns had nothing to do with sports, he answered, "If kids ain't sport, what is?") He regularly ran letters from readers and answered them. He turned comments on pressing baseball issues—the inability of the White Sox to score runs, the spitball, the upstart Federal League that was posing a threat to the American and National Leagues, and more—into "Cubist Baseball," a brilliant parody of literary modernism. And he wrote about himself in a comical way, as when he declared his candidacy for mayor of Chicago:

Me for Mayor:

The formal petition which will place the Wake's editor in the running as a nonpartisan dependent candidate for mayor was filed yesterday with a window washer in the office of Judge Scully and Denny Egan. The petition was written on the back of the carte du jour of a well known dive on Dearborn street . . .

A *Tribune* editor was the first to suggest that Lardner write a baseball story to be printed in the feature section. When Lardner submitted one in the form of letters from a vain and clueless but somehow endearing pitcher named Jack Keefe to a friend back home, the editor thought misspelled words, shaky grammar, and use of the vernacular were out of place in the paper. So Lardner sent "A Busher's Letters Home" to the *Saturday Evening Post*, where it was printed in June 1914 and created a sensation.

The public and the magazine demanded more “busher” stories, and by the end of the year he had written another five. They were collected two years later in the book *You Know Me Al*, one of Lardner’s crowning achievements. In all he wrote ten magazine pieces in 1914 and twenty-nine more over the next three years. This allowed him to double his *Tribune* salary of \$100 a week and put him well on the way to stardom.

While it is clear that Lardner used “In the Wake of the News” as a laboratory where he could practice the techniques of his fiction, the reverse was also true. Suddenly finding himself acclaimed for his stories, and becoming more comfortable and proficient in writing them, he brought his new craft to the pages of the *Tribune*. At about the time the Jack Keefe stories were being published, the “Wake” column began running letters from a ballplayer named Bill to his friend Steve that are similar to the original, if not always as well crafted. Beyond that, Lardner moved into territory no sports columnist before or since has ever occupied on a regular basis. He left not only the events of the day behind, but sports as well.

He gave his readers an inside look at the newspaper business and, in the “Friend Harvey” letters to his editor, Harvey Woodruff, he complained about his working conditions. He sent up the plots of “Carmen,” “Rigoletto,” and “Madam Butterfly.” He made sport with Arthur Conan Doyle, lyrics of war songs, and love letters. He wrote a parody of golf instruction manuals purporting to show how to use a spoon while eating. He chastised a *Tribune* editor for fussing over the misspelling of the name of a character in *Oliver Twist*, and wrote a column titled “Fifteen Cents Worth” that directly prefigured “Haircut.” Weeks would go by without any reference to sports.

No matter how far Lardner strayed from writing about athletes and the games they played, however, “In the Wake of the News” never left the *Tribune* sports section, where it appeared alongside reports of baseball and football games, horse races and golf tournaments. It doesn’t seem to have occurred to the paper that the column might have been more appropriate in the news or feature sections. Lardner had established himself as a sports humorist and, in the eyes of his editors and readers, that is what he would remain for six years.

“All I ask from Lardner,” Woodruff once said, “is copy.”

Lardner's commitment to journalism has led to an ongoing debate over what might have been. Did it distract him from concentrating on writing fiction? Did it keep him from writing the Great American Novel? Did it ultimately consign him to a lower place in the pantheon of American writers than he otherwise might have earned? Edmund Wilson, one of the leading critics of the era, expressed these concerns after some of Lardner's early work was republished in a book. Wilson admired the stories, but wanted more. "Will Ring Lardner, then, go on to his *Huckleberry Finn* or has he already told all he knows?" he asked. "Here is a man who has had the freedom of the modern West no less than Mark Twain did of the old one. . . . If Ring Lardner has anything more to give us, the time has now come to deliver it."

Fitzgerald also weighed in after Lardner died in an otherwise affectionate tribute to the man with whom he had spent so many companionable hours in Gatsby country. Lardner's achievements fell short of his capabilities, Fitzgerald wrote, because, "During those years, when most men of promise achieve an adult education, if only in the school of war, Ring moved in the company of a few dozen illiterates playing a boy's game. A boy's game, with no more possibilities in it than a boy could master, a game bounded by walls which kept out novelty or danger, change or adventure. . . . However deeply Ring might cut into it, his cake had the diameter of Frank Chance's diamond."

But Lardner knew himself better than any critic. Ring Lardner Jr. wrote that "when I asked my father if he would ever write a novel, he said that after one chapter he would be even more bored than the reader." And in a letter to Theodore Dreiser, Lardner spoke of "novelists, whose patience and energy are far beyond any good traits I can claim."

So Lardner spent his life writing what he wanted to write: the short stories that are held in such high critical esteem, the theater pieces and song lyrics he enjoyed beyond measure, and the journalism that has been neglected, and uncollected for too long.