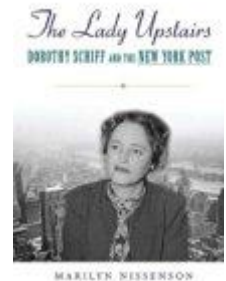


Marilyn Nissenson. *The Lady Upstairs: Dorothy Schiff and the New York Post.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007. 500 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-31310-4.



Reviewed by Maurine Beasley (Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland College Park)

Published on Jhistory (May, 2008)

Dorothy Schiff and the *New York Post*

Dorothy Schiff had four marriages and more love affairs, but, as Marilyn Nissenson writes in this well-researched book, her primary affection centered for nearly forty years on the *New York Post*, the oldest American newspaper in continuous publication. Today a creature of Rupert Murdoch, the *Post* personifies the sensationalism of tabloid newspapers, but during the years of Schiff's ownership—from 1939 to 1976—it occupied a different niche in New York City journalism. A lively cousin compared to its straitlaced relative, the *New York Times*, the *Post* spoke for, and to, an important segment of its hometown audience, the liberal Jewish community that relished both leftist causes and entertainment as it moved up in the world from working-class immigrant origins.

A beautiful heiress who could have dominated her own society columns, Schiff belonged to a special category of twentieth-century newspaper publishers. That category included women like Eleanor Medill "Cissy" Patterson and Katharine Graham in Washington, D.C., whose family money and connections gave them control of important

newspapers. In temperament, Schiff bore some resemblance to the mercurial Patterson of the Medill-Patterson publishing empire, whose leadership made the *Washington Times-Herald* a great success during World War II only to die after her death in 1948. The more somber Graham built for the future, brilliantly preserving the *Washington Post* for her children after her husband's suicide in 1963. While Schiff did not look ahead like Graham, she functioned far more independently than other women involved in New York newspaper ownership, as Nissenson points out. Although Iphigene Sulzberger's father left her the *New York Times*, she did not run it herself. Alicia Patterson, Cissy Patterson's niece, founded *Newsday* on Long Island after being denied the opportunity to assume control of *New York's Daily News*, which her family owned, but it was her husband who held the purse strings of *Newsday*.

Schiff functioned as a more independent entity, buying her newspaper and taking charge of it personally. Men surrounded and influenced her, but Schiff, known as "Dolly," maintained her sense

of self and gave her newspaper a personality all its own. Combining old-fashioned crusades against wrongdoers with liberal causes that promoted the Democratic Party as well as social and cultural chitchat, the *Post*, according to Nissenson, offered its readers, who were predominantly Jewish, guidance on how to make it into the mainstream. Not one to mingle easily with her staff, the feisty and flirtatious Schiff preferred to stay in her penthouse, but she oversaw all the contents of the *Post*, including its advertising, displaying feminine wiles along with a prudent business mind. Describing Dolly as a "quintessential New Yorker," Nissenson, a journalist herself, calls Schiff "the most dynamic newspaper publisher of her day" (p. xii).

While this volume lacks the candid charm of Graham's Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiography, *Personal History* (1997), or the exhaustive detail of *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind the New York Times* (1999) by Alex S. Jones and Susan E. Tift, it does a commendable job of placing Schiff within the circle of prominent publishers who influenced twentieth-century politics. Basing her narrative on Schiff's archival material fleshed out with personal interviews, Nissenson tells a compelling tale of politics, power, and gender. An intimate of Franklin D. Roosevelt (with whom she may have had a romantic fling in the late 1930s), an admirer of Eleanor Roosevelt, and a devotee of New Deal philosophy, Schiff presided over a newspaper unafraid of muckraking.

The *Post* attacked local villains, like slum landlords and formidable foes like J. Edgar Hoover and Senator Joseph McCarthy; exposed Richard Nixon's slush fund; supported the civil rights movement; and opposed the Vietnam War. Under Schiff, it assembled an impressive group of journalists who stood up for liberal democracy in the midst of Cold War hostilities. Luminaries included editorial writers James Wechsler and Max Lerner, literary stylists Murray Kempton and Pete Hamill, along with Ted Poston, the first African American

reporter for a major newspaper, and Sylvia Porter, the first woman to become a popular financial columnist.

Schiff became a publisher by accident. The granddaughter of a well-known philanthropist, Jacob Henry Schiff, a German-born Jew who had made a fortune in New York banking, Schiff was born in 1903. She flunked out of Bryn Mawr, and in 1923 married handsome but impoverished Richard Hall whom she later referred to as a "third-rate--not even second-rate guy" and had two children (p. 25). On a voyage to Europe in 1931 after separating from Hall, she had an affair with Max Beaverbrook, the legendary British press lord, who interested her in politics, intellectual pursuits, and newspapers. Back in the United States, she divorced Hall and married George Backer by whom she had another child. Backer, who had theatrical interests, was active in Democratic politics and encouraged his wife's flirtation with Roosevelt.

On a whim, the Backers took over the money-losing *New York Post* in 1939 to support the Democratic Party and provide employment for Backer. Schiff, whose money financed the transfer, decided to learn about the tabloid's operation. As it continued to slide downward, the Backers reorganized their acquisition under Ted Thackrey, a *Post* editor, with Schiff naming herself publisher in 1941. The Backers divorced in 1943, and Schiff soon married Thackrey in a ceremony at the newspaper. He pushed for unprofitable acquisitions in broadcasting and other venues, and annoyed Schiff by deserting Harry Truman and the Democratic Party to support Henry Wallace for president in 1948 in spite of Wallace's alleged Communist ties. Startled readers watched the couple battle back and forth over the Wallace endorsement in weekly columns each of them wrote for the *Post*.

The next year, Schiff divorced Thackrey and took charge of the newspaper. She made it her life work, overseeing the only one of New York's eight

daily newspapers to address a two-tiered audience of mainly Jewish readers--the working class of the Bronx and Brooklyn and the intellectuals of Manhattan. In 1951, she began writing her own weekend column picturing herself as a Democratic Party power broker. She married one more time--in 1953--to Rudolf Sonneborn, a businessman active in raising funds for Israel. Sonneborn had little involvement in the *Post*, and the marriage ended in 1965 after Sonneborn became physically incapacitated.

As the New York newspaper field shrank in the 1960s, the *Post*, which had weathered recurrent financial crises, benefited from the loss of competition. Schiff broke ranks with other publishers fighting to stave off union demands in the face of automation. When a strike and lockout closed down all New York newspapers for 114 days in 1962 and 1963, Schiff resumed publication without waiting for fellow publishers to settle with their own unions. The lengthy quietus in publishing resulted in a permanent loss of readers. As other newspapers combined and folded, the *Post* was left alone in the afternoon field in 1967. Schiff had managed to succeed when her rivals failed, but victory was relatively short lived.

According to Nissenson, Schiff and her staff failed to understand the changing racial and economic scene that confronted readers as domestic unrest fueled by discrimination pushed aside concerns over dangers to liberalism stemming from the Cold War. Staff morale plummeted as younger journalists, including women who complained of second-class status, challenged Schiff's parsimonious management. From a high point of seven hundred thousand in circulation in the 1960s, *Post* readership dropped to less than six hundred thousand in 1974 amid criticisms that the newspaper had lost its voice as a champion of causes and reflection of New York's ethnicity.

Schiff happily sold the newspaper to Murdoch in 1976. She wished to keep her family from paying heavy estate taxes taking effect the following

year. Schiff did not die until 1989, having devoted her final years mainly to her children and grandchildren. In 1976, her authorized biography, *Men, Money and Magic: The Story of Dorothy Schiff* by Jeffrey Potter, appeared. The spicy title hardly gave justice to her extraordinary journalistic career. Fortunately, Nissenson does so in this highly recommended biography.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Maurine Beasley. Review of Nissenson, Marilyn. *The Lady Upstairs: Dorothy Schiff and the New York Post*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14494>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.